

Exploring the Evolution of Gender Identity through Subject Pronouns: A Comparative Study of Gender Equality Communities

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to explore the use of subject pronouns in the context of gender identity within gender equality communities both nationally and internationally. A qualitative approach with a comparative case study design was employed to investigate individuals' experiences, perceptions, and views on the significance of using inclusive pronouns. The research was conducted in Indonesia and several international countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on members of gender equality communities involved in campaigns or policies related to gender identity. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, document analysis, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The findings indicate that while the use of inclusive pronouns is widely accepted in international settings, significant challenges persist in Indonesia, where binary pronouns remain prevalent. This study concludes that to foster the acceptance of inclusive pronouns, ongoing educational efforts and policy support are essential.

INTRODUCTION

Gender identity has become one of the most discussed topics in recent decades, both nationally and internationally. Gender-related issues, such as gender equality, discrimination against gender minorities, and recognition of non-binary identities, are gaining widespread attention. According to a report from the World Health Organization (WHO), around 1.7% of the world's population identifies as trans or non-binary. Despite growing awareness of this issue, many countries still face challenges in integrating the rights of individuals based on gender identity into their social and legal policies. In various countries, the use of subject pronouns that correspond to a person's gender identity has become a symbol of major change in the fight for recognition and equality of their rights (Stoian, 2023). The use of inclusive pronouns, such as "they/them" for non-binary individuals, has gained a wider place in public conversation, but there is still resistance in societies that consider this a controversial change (Motschenbacher, 2010).

Globally, many individuals do not feel represented in the use of the traditional pronouns "he" and "she." Those who identify as non-binary or genderqueer often find it difficult to find pronouns that match their identity. This is an even bigger challenge in countries that have not fully accepted the concept of broader gender identities, where the binary system (male and female) is still very dominant. The use of pronouns that do not correspond to an individual's gender identity can lead to stress, anxiety, and feelings of not being accepted in society (Breccia, 2021; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). On the other hand, recognition of gender identity through the use of appropriate pronouns can provide a sense of security and worth to individuals in that community. One of the specific problems often faced is the lack of

understanding of the importance of pronouns in gender identity and how it relates to the struggle for gender equality (Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).

Various studies have been conducted to understand the relationship between gender identity and the use of pronouns in language. In a study conducted by Sheydaei (2021), it was found that the use of pronouns that do not correspond to gender identity can exacerbate stigma against transgender and non-binary individuals, as well as increase psychological difficulties. They also emphasize the importance of more inclusive policies in workplaces and schools that can support individuals with diverse gender identities.

Furthermore, research by McCready (2024) examines how the use of pronouns in everyday conversation can reflect the power structure and gender dominance in society. They found that changes in the custom of using pronouns can be an important indicator in the cultural shift towards more inclusive gender equality. This research shows that although some communities have begun to actively use gender-neutral pronouns, many individuals are reluctant to adopt these changes, even when they recognize their importance.

Another study by Fugate (2013) provides insight into how the use of pronouns in social contexts affects individual identity, especially in genderqueer communities. The study shows that individuals who are given the option to use pronouns that align with their identity tend to feel more accepted and valued in society, which in turn improves their mental and emotional well-being. These findings reinforce the argument that the correct use of pronouns is essential in supporting gender equality.

The urgency of this research lies in the rapid changes that have occurred in the understanding and acceptance of gender identity in society. As more and more individuals identify themselves outside of binary categories, it is important to investigate how pronoun use can be a tool to promote gender equality and reduce discrimination. Although some countries and organizations have adopted policies that are more inclusive of gender identity, there are still major challenges in changing people's attitudes and perceptions of this issue (Cordoba, 2022; Noviana & Indah, 2023). By understanding how the use of pronouns reflects the dynamics of gender equality in communities, this study is expected to provide useful insights for policymakers, educators, and activists in their efforts to promote broader gender equality.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its approach of comparing gender equality communities at the national and international levels in the use of subject pronouns. Most previous research has focused on the influence of pronoun changes in a particular social context or country (Barnes, 2023; Dahunsi, 2017). This study will provide a broader perspective by comparing these practices across countries and cultures, providing insights into the factors that influence the adoption of inclusive pronoun use in various social and political backgrounds. In addition, this study will explore how gender equality communities educate and encourage the public to accept diversity of gender identities through language change, especially pronoun use.

The main objective of this study is to examine the evolution of gender identity through the use of subject pronouns in gender equality communities, as well as to make comparisons between communities at the national and international levels. This study aims to understand how changes in the use of pronouns reflect cultural shifts towards the acceptance of more

inclusive gender identities. In addition, this study also aims to identify the challenges faced in implementing the appropriate use of pronouns, as well as the strategies used by the community to raise public awareness of this issue.

This research is expected to provide benefits both practically and theoretically. Practically, the results of this research can provide recommendations for policy makers, organizations, and educational institutions in formulating policies that are more inclusive of the use of pronouns in various social contexts (Lazzaretto, 2022; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Theoretically, this research will enrich the literature on the relationship between language and gender identity, as well as provide new insights into the study of gender, linguistics, and human rights. Another benefit is that it provides guidance for communities striving for gender equality in their efforts to create an environment that is more inclusive and accepting of diverse gender identities.

The implications of this research are far-reaching, especially in the context of social and educational policy. It can encourage policy changes that are more sensitive to the use of pronouns that correspond to individuals' gender identities, whether in the workplace, schools, or other institutions. In addition, the results of this study can also inspire more further research on how language shapes our perceptions of gender identity, as well as how changes in language can be an effective tool in the fight for gender equality around the world. This research can also contribute to the development of more inclusive education programs, where language is used as a means to reduce stigma and discrimination against individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design to understand the phenomenon of subject pronoun usage in the context of gender identity in gender equality communities, both nationally and internationally. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore individuals' experiences, perceptions, and views regarding pronoun usage in the formation of their gender identity, as well as the social dynamics within these communities (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This research also involves comparisons between several communities in Indonesia and countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada to see how the use of subject pronouns reflects attitudes toward more inclusive gender identities.

The research locations are divided into two, namely national and international. In Indonesia, research was conducted in several gender equality communities that actively promote understanding of gender identity and the use of inclusive pronouns, while internationally, research was conducted in countries with more progressive policies regarding the use of inclusive pronouns. Research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, involving members of gender equality communities who were involved in policies or discussions related to the use of subject pronouns. The main instruments used were in-depth interviews and document analysis to explore individual views on the importance of inclusive pronouns and their impact on public awareness of gender identity (Babbie & Rubin, 2016).

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, document analysis, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gain additional insights into the group's views on the use of inclusive pronouns. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, and participatory observations were carried out in community events to understand the application of pronouns in everyday conversations. The collected data was then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify the main themes that emerged, which could provide a deeper understanding of the impact of the use of inclusive pronouns on gender identity and gender equality in the communities studied (Boddington, 2016; Tesch-Römer et al., 2008).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

General Description of Respondents

This study involved 50 respondents consisting of 25 individuals from the gender equality community in Indonesia and 25 individuals from the international gender equality community, specifically from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. These respondents were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

1. Respondents who are actively involved in the gender equality community.
2. Respondents who have direct experience regarding the use of inclusive pronouns in conversation or policy.
3. Respondents who can provide in-depth insights regarding the challenges and benefits of using more inclusive pronouns.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents consisted of various backgrounds of age, sex, and gender identity, with the majority of respondents being in the 20 to 35 age group. Most respondents identified themselves as heterosexual, but there were also a number of respondents who identified themselves as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary).

The following is an overview of the age, gender, and gender identity of the respondents:

1. Age: 20-35 years (70%), 36-50 years (20%), 51 years and over (10%).
2. Gender: Male (35%), Female (40%), Non-Binary (25%).
3. Gender Identity: Heterosexual (60%), LGBTQ+ (40%).

In this study, in-depth interviews with respondents provided significant insights into the importance of changing the use of pronouns in the gender equality community. The interviews involved 50 respondents from various communities at the national and international levels, with the aim of exploring their experiences related to the use of inclusive pronouns and their impact on gender equality. Based on the interviews conducted, there are several key findings that reflect individual perspectives and experiences regarding this change.

Most respondents, especially from the international community, stated that the use of inclusive pronouns is essential in creating a safe and supportive space for individuals with diverse gender identities. The use of pronouns that correspond to a person's gender identity is considered the first step in recognizing and respecting the diversity of gender identities.

Respondents from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom emphasized that this change plays an important role in creating a more open and accepting social environment.

One respondent from Canada said, “When I use the correct pronouns, I feel valued and recognized for who I really am.” This statement shows that pronouns have a major psychological impact on individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms. They feel more valued and recognized when their gender identity is respected through the use of appropriate pronouns. This reinforces the argument that language not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a means of shaping and reinforcing self-identity.

Although the use of inclusive pronouns is becoming more accepted in many places, respondents from several countries, especially Indonesia, expressed major challenges in changing old habits. Most people are still accustomed to using traditional binary pronouns such as “he” and “she,” which are more difficult to change even though awareness of the importance of inclusivity is growing. Respondents from Indonesia stated that despite progress in some communities, the use of inclusive pronouns is still considered foreign and difficult for most individuals to accept.

One Indonesian respondent commented, “In Indonesia, despite progress, many people still find it difficult to change the habit of using ‘he’ and ‘she’. This requires time and intensive education.” This reflects the broader cultural challenge of changing perceptions and habits related to gender. Therefore, this change does not only depend on individual awareness, but also on continuous educational efforts and support from the wider community to introduce and facilitate the use of inclusive pronouns.

In interviews with respondents from the international community, most of them reported that institutional policies that support the use of inclusive pronouns have a significant impact on reducing stigma and discrimination in the workplace and school. These policies not only help individuals feel more accepted, but also provide space for them to express their gender identity without fear or anxiety.

A respondent from the United States revealed, “In our workplace, there is a policy that supports the use of correct pronouns. This really helps us to feel accepted.” Recognition of the use of appropriate pronouns in formal policies such as in the workplace or school makes individuals feel valued and respected. Policies like this not only support diversity, but also reinforce the institution's commitment to gender equality.

Although inclusive institutional policies have been widely implemented in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, respondents from Indonesia and other developing countries report that the implementation of similar policies at the local level is still limited. Some respondents mentioned that although at the international level there has been progress in the adoption of the use of inclusive pronouns, at the local level there is still considerable misunderstanding and resistance to this.

In Indonesia, for example, policies at the school and university levels to introduce the use of inclusive pronouns are still very limited. Respondents from Indonesia mentioned that although there are several universities that have begun to educate students about the importance of inclusive pronouns, most people are still unaware of its importance.

In this study, it was also found that the acceptance of inclusive pronouns is strongly influenced by social and cultural factors. In countries that are more conservative or have strict gender norms, changes in the use of pronouns are still considered taboo or difficult to accept. Respondents from Indonesia, for example, revealed that deep-rooted cultural values in society often hinder changes in the use of pronouns.

One respondent from Indonesia said, “The strong patriarchal culture in Indonesia makes many people uncomfortable with the idea of pronouns that do not correspond to their biological sex.” This factor shows that changes in language and the use of pronouns are not only related to individual awareness, but also to the larger cultural values that exist in society.

Based on the interviews conducted, the majority of respondents revealed that acceptance of the use of inclusive pronouns has a positive impact on individual well-being. Respondents from the international community emphasized that using pronouns that correspond to a person's gender identity can boost confidence and improve their mental well-being. They feel more valued when others use the correct pronouns.

Table 1. Positive impact of the use of inclusive pronouns on individuals

The Positive Impact of Using Inclusive Pronouns		International Respondents (%)	Indonesian respondents (%)
Increased Sense of Acceptance	of	85%	40%
Improved Mental Well-Being		78%	30%
Improves Social Relationships		72%	50%

Necessary Education and Outreach Efforts

Based on these findings, it is clear that in order to increase acceptance of the use of inclusive pronouns, more intensive education and outreach efforts are needed, especially in developing countries. In addition, it is important for the gender equality community to continue to support campaigns and policies that promote changes in pronoun usage. In more progressive countries, existing policies can be used as a model for other countries in introducing and supporting these changes.

Overall, the findings from these interviews show that the use of inclusive pronouns not only serves to respect individual gender identities, but is also an important step in creating a more inclusive and diverse society.

Findings from the Questionnaire

The questionnaire given to 50 respondents collected data on how often they use inclusive pronouns in everyday life, as well as their attitudes towards the use of these pronouns. The following are the findings from the questionnaire:

1. Frequency of Use of Inclusive Pronouns: The majority of respondents (80%) from the international community reported that they use inclusive pronouns in everyday conversations, whether at work, school, or in social gatherings. On the other hand, only 40% of respondents from Indonesia reported actively using inclusive pronouns.

2. Attitudes Towards the Use of Inclusive Pronouns: In general, 75% of international respondents support the use of inclusive pronouns, while in Indonesia, this figure only reaches 45%. Despite the support for the use of inclusive pronouns, 30% of Indonesian respondents stated that they felt uncomfortable using unfamiliar pronouns, such as “they/them.”

Results of Observations

Participatory observations conducted in gender equality communities show that the use of inclusive pronouns still faces major challenges, especially in more conservative environments. In some international communities, observations show that inclusive pronouns are actively used in informal and formal conversations.

However, in Indonesia, the use of inclusive pronouns is still limited to discussions involving individuals with high gender awareness. In more general meetings, traditional pronouns such as “he” and “she” are still dominant. These observations indicate that although there is growing awareness, language change takes longer to be accepted in the wider community.

Table 2. Frequency of use of inclusive pronouns by community and gender

Community	Inclusive Pronoun Usage (%)	Traditional Pronoun Usage (%)
International Community	80%	20%
Indonesian Community	40%	60%

Discussion

Interview Data and Interpretation of Interview Results

In-depth interviews with respondents revealed a variety of views and experiences regarding the use of inclusive pronouns in gender equality communities. Most respondents from the international community emphasized the importance of using pronouns that correspond to gender identity to create a safe and supportive space for individuals with diverse gender identities. Most of these respondents came from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, where the use of gender-neutral pronouns, such as “they/them,” has been more widely accepted in social culture and in the workplace.

The statement of a respondent from Canada, “When I use the correct pronouns, I feel valued and recognized for who I really am,” shows how pronouns have a significant psychological impact on the well-being of individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms. This reinforces the argument that pronouns are more than just a communication tool, but also play a role in affirming and respecting an individual's gender identity. This view is in line with the theory of social constructionism, which states that gender identity is formed through social interaction, and language serves as an important means in this process.

However, the interviews also revealed that the biggest challenge in using inclusive pronouns lies in changing habits that have long been ingrained in society. Respondents from Indonesia, for example, revealed that despite increased awareness of the importance of using inclusive pronouns, people still find it difficult to adapt to these changes. As one Indonesian

respondent said, “In Indonesia, despite progress, many people still find it difficult to change their habit of using ‘he’ and ‘she’. This requires time and intensive education.”

Interpretation of the interview results shows that shifts in pronoun use depend not only on individual factors, but also on broader social and cultural factors. The influence of traditional customs and norms, such as patriarchy and binary gender values, is a significant obstacle to changing these habits, especially in countries with conservative cultures such as Indonesia.

Discussion of Questionnaire Results

The results of the questionnaire given to respondents reveal significant differences in attitudes and practices of inclusive pronoun use between the international community and Indonesia. Of the 25 international respondents, 80% reported that they actively use inclusive pronouns in their daily lives. In contrast, only 40% of Indonesian respondents reported regular use of inclusive pronouns.

This data shows that despite growing awareness in Indonesia of the importance of gender equality, acceptance of the use of more inclusive pronouns is still limited. In comparison, in more progressive countries, such as the United States and Canada, the use of gender-neutral pronouns has been more widely accepted, both in informal and formal conversations. Most international respondents who use inclusive pronouns report that they do so at work, at school, and in everyday social interactions.

Respondents' attitudes towards the use of inclusive pronouns also showed significant differences. About 75% of international respondents supported the use of inclusive pronouns, while in Indonesia, the figure was only 45%. Some Indonesian respondents expressed their discomfort with the use of pronouns that do not correspond to biological sex, as one respondent said, “I feel uncomfortable using ‘they’ for people I know as men or women.”

This finding shows that social and cultural factors play an important role in the acceptance of inclusive pronouns. In countries that are more open to gender issues, the use of inclusive pronouns is considered natural and accepted, while in more conservative countries, such as Indonesia, the change is still considered foreign and takes time to be widely accepted.

Analysis of Observation Results

Observations made in gender equality communities show that although there is acceptance of the use of inclusive pronouns, their implementation at the local level is still limited. In some international countries, such as Canada and the United Kingdom, observations show that the use of inclusive pronouns is actively used in social interactions in workplaces, schools, and public environments. In these places, individuals feel more valued and accepted when their gender identity is recognized through the use of appropriate pronouns.

However, in Indonesia, observations show that although some communities are starting to accept the use of inclusive pronouns, most people still use the more traditional binary pronouns. In community events involving discussions about gender and equality, such as seminars and workshops, the use of inclusive pronouns tends to be more accepted, but outside of these events, many people feel reluctant to use these pronouns in everyday life.

This observation shows that although there is an increased awareness of the importance of inclusivity, changes in language practices take longer to be accepted by the wider

community, especially in countries that are still strongly influenced by traditional binary gender norms.

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study are in line with previous research conducted by Westbrook & Schilt (2013) which shows that the use of pronouns that correspond to gender identity can help reduce stigma against transgender and non-binary individuals. Their research found that changes in the habitual use of pronouns can increase feelings of acceptance and respect for individual rights.

Research by Macmillan & Blackwood (2019) also underlines the importance of using inclusive pronouns in creating gender equality in society. They found that the use of inclusive pronouns can create a safer and more supportive space for individuals with diverse gender identities. This research shows that despite resistance to this change, institutional policies that support the use of inclusive pronouns can help reduce discrimination and improve individual mental well-being.

In the Indonesian context, these findings are also in line with previous research by Fugate et al. (2021), which notes that despite growing awareness of the importance of gender equality, many individuals still find it difficult to accept changes in existing language habits. Therefore, changes in pronoun use require more intensive educational efforts and social support to be accepted in the wider community.

Practical Implications

The practical implication of this research is the importance of policies that support the use of inclusive pronouns in various institutions, whether in the workplace, schools, or in the community in general. Educational institutions and workplaces must have clear policies regarding the use of pronouns according to individual gender identities, as well as provide training for staff and community members to understand and support these changes.

In addition, it is important for organizations and institutions to promote awareness of the importance of using inclusive pronouns through educational campaigns and social media. Educational programs that focus on understanding gender identity and the importance of language in creating safe and inclusive spaces can help accelerate change in the acceptance of the use of inclusive pronouns.

Research Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights into the use of inclusive pronouns, there are several limitations that need to be considered. First, the sample used in this study was limited to 50 respondents from the gender equality community. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the entire population. Further research with a larger and more diverse sample will be needed to obtain a more comprehensive picture.

In addition, this study focuses more on the perspective of respondents from the gender equality community, while the individual perspective of the wider community is still lacking. Future research can broaden the focus by including views from various levels of society to understand how the use of inclusive pronouns is accepted in society in general.

Another limitation is the reliance on interview and questionnaire methods to collect data, which may cause bias in the responses provided by the respondents. Therefore, further research

using triangulation methods or mixed research approaches can provide more valid and reliable results.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the use of inclusive pronouns has a significant impact on creating a safer and more supportive space for individuals with diverse gender identities. In the international community, the use of pronouns that correspond to gender identity has been more widely accepted and plays an important role in reducing stigma and improving individual mental well-being. However, in Indonesia, despite progress in awareness of the importance of using inclusive pronouns, cultural and social challenges remain a major obstacle. Entrenched language habits, as well as traditional gender norms, mean that changes in pronoun use require time and ongoing educational efforts.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that future research expand the sample by involving more diverse community groups, especially in areas that are still conservative on gender issues. In addition, it is important to conduct more in-depth research on the social and cultural factors that influence acceptance of the use of inclusive pronouns. Subsequent research can also use a mixed research approach to obtain more comprehensive results regarding the implementation of policies related to the use of pronouns in various institutions, as well as to explore in more depth the challenges faced in introducing these changes at the local level.

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