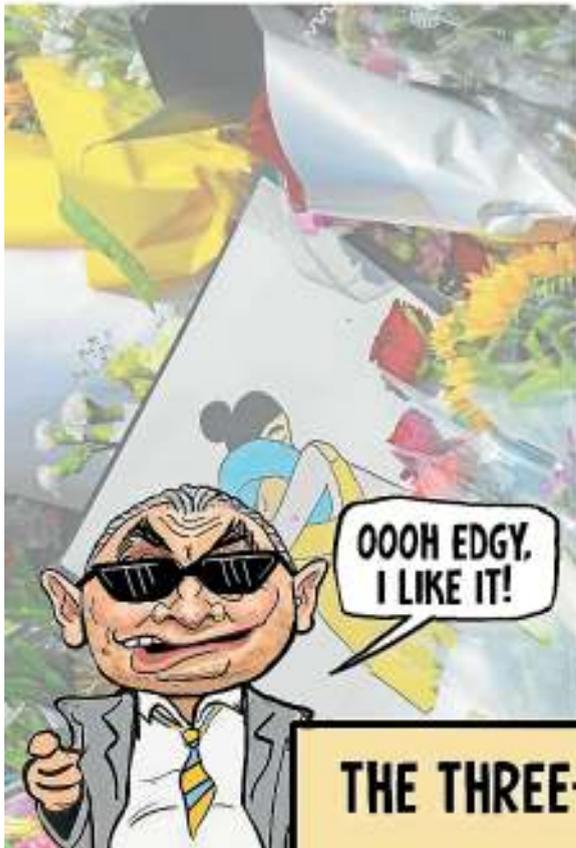


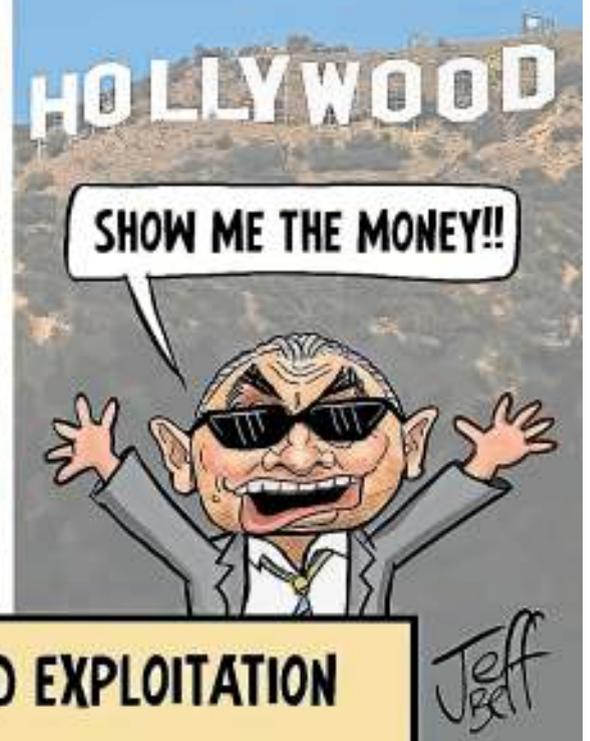
1. FIND A WAY TOO RECENT TRAGEDY



2. CHOOSE THE WRONG PROTAGONIST



3. DON'T PROPERLY CONSULT WITH THE VICTIMS



THE THREE-STEP GUIDE TO HOLLYWOOD EXPLOITATION

Jeff

# Is saying 'female' a sexist use of language?



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A week ago, I was talking with someone who is a medical expert by profession. Towards the end of the conversation, he asked, "Is it sexist to say 'female' instead of 'woman'?" Like most things related to sociolinguistics, my answer began, "Well, that depends."

You see, this particular question is one that I had already looked into as a matter of personal academic curiosity. Having completed my university and postgraduate education in the United States, I cringed when I noticed the frequency with which I was hearing Kiwis say "females" when talking about women.

In a number of places (North America included), it is almost a dirty word to refer to a woman as a "female". The discomfort with this term comes from the robust social science and humanities research hubs in these locations which have been



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heavily involved with debates on feminism, critical scholarship, and equal rights movements.

So, what does social science and humanities research have to say about "female"? First, "female" refers to a biological status of a species at birth, while "woman" refers to a recognised gender role in society. Many gender studies scholars, such as Judith Butler, and language and gender scholars, such as Kira Hall, have examined the ways in which people "perform" (or not) the gender(s) expected of them in societal contexts. In brief, if someone is born biologically "female", she still uses language and social cues every day that mark her as a woman in society.

As sociolinguist Robin Lakoff frequently points out, any species can be "female", but only a human can be a "woman".

Additionally, sociolinguists such as Robin Lakoff have explained that the distinction between the biological term "female" and the social term "woman" means that to call someone a "female" can carry clinical undertones and have a dehumanising effect. As she has frequently pointed out, any species can be "female", but only a human can be a "woman".

However, as alluded to at the beginning, this is not the end of the story. While the arguments laid out above are important, they are also arguments largely founded and put forward by those in the privileged positions of academia. Sociolinguists are aware of the importance of not dictating what people "should" do, instead observing what it is people *actually* do.

If we were to shout from the ivory tower that some people speak "right" and some people speak "wrong", we would very often find ourselves privileging the language of those already privileged. Many communities do use the term "female" regularly to refer to women. It is not an intentional slight. It is an established item of vocabulary that marks one as a member of a community that uses this term. Therefore, it is not wrong.

So, is it sexist to use "female" to refer to a woman? Well, that depends.

## Contact us

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This distinction between biological sex and social gender is important for a great many people, including those who were born one sex but identifying as another gender, those born intersex, and those who identify as a third or no gender.

As many cultures around the world have recognised (including indigenous cultures such as Māori and Native American, Pasifika cultures such as Samoan, and places such as India and Thailand), when gender is an important part of someone's identity, they display this identity through their language.

This is done every day through word choice, intonation, speed of talk, hesitation time, and other such features. People are so good at showing their chosen identity that it is unlikely most people even notice (which also means they're meeting societal expectations!).

The Sydney Morning Herald

## A case worthy of an exception

The sad case of the Murugappan family taken from their home in Biloela, Queensland, and detained for the past three years has dragged on for too long. Since their detention as illegal arrivals in 2018, the plight of the Sri Lankan-born mother and father and their two young daughters, born in Australia, has been a cause celebre for critics of Australia's tough border policies.

They were taken from the small town where they had lived for several years and sent to the remote Christmas Island detention facility until they exhausted their appeals against deportation. The case grabbed headlines again last week because the younger of the girls was flown to Perth and diagnosed with septicemia and pneumonia.

This case is not as morally monochrome as pro-refugee

## Viewpoint

activists sometimes portray it. The courts have found the girls' parents' claims for asylum in Australia are weak. The risk of persecution if they are "refouled" to Sri Lanka is low. In normal circumstances they would be deported.

Yet this might be a good time to make an exception. Even if their parents did enter Australia illegally, keeping children in prolonged detention is an act of cruelty and a denial of basic human rights. As former chief justice Gerard Brennan said in a letter to the *Herald*, this is a "show of heartlessness towards Australian children".

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke should use his legal discretion to let them stay permanently. This small act of compassion would save millions wasted on detaining good people.