One gender more equal in workplace

Janet Holmes

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

GIRLS and boys come out to play — or should that be boys and girls? There is an interesting asymmetry between many supposedly parallel terms for the female and male sex.

Ladies first in the formal phrase, ladies and gentlemen, but what about men and women, males and females, or the sexist phrase, guys and dolls?

Though shorter forms are generally preferred first in word pairs, gender also plays a role. Linguists have shown that when the length and sound structure of the words is the same, people tend to prefer male terms first.

Gendered patterns often reveal social perceptions. Gendered occupational terms are especially interesting because they often give clues about what is considered "normal" in our society: So we hear family man but not family woman (what else would she be after all?), and career woman or career girl, but not career man. These terms indicate that society regards a man who is focused on his family as unusual, and the same is true of a woman whose career is a priority. Of course, language often lags behind reality, so these terms may eventually become obsolete.

Examples of "boy" in workplace contexts in our two million-word collection of New Zealand English generally refer to low-status, entry-level occupations filled by school-age males. It seems reasonable to talk of a 14-year-old newsboy delivering papers or a 17-year-old delivery boy delivering pizzas. But we generally don't describe the middle-aged man who delivers furniture as a delivery boy, or refer to our newsreaders as newsboys.

By contrast "girl" is often used for mature professional women. People talk of shop girls, office girls, and the girls on the tills even when the women referred to are well past their teens. In an outstanding example, a 70-year-old woman was described as "Wapping's oldest office girl".

Using the term girl to refer to an adult working woman suggests immaturity and is often experienced as patronising. During a job interview when the interviewer commented, "Well, you seem to be quite a bright girl, don't you?", the 30-year-old interviewee responded by visibly bristling with resentment. Labelling professional women as girls is insulting. These labels provide a linguistic version of the "glass ceiling".

The same patronising effect can be achieved by referring to an older man as a boy, for example, "there's a lot of life in the old boy yet". But it's rare to hear a professional man referred to as a boy.

Girl is three times more likely than boy to refer to an adult, especially in the workplace context. And when boy does occur, it is usually intended as humorous or patronising.

THE plural term "boys" seems to function differently from the singular boy. Groups of male adults in various professions are readily referred to informally as the boys.

Indeed, in addition to the old boys' network, boys often refers to groups of particularly successful, influential or powerful males, for example, the big boys, the four-figure boys, the backroom boys. Perhaps this is an example of the tall-poppy syndrome at work. We have to cut such powerful groups down to size to make them bearable, so we use a term that suggests immaturity.

It is encouraging that reference to adult females as girls has apparently decreased in work contexts over the past 30 years or so, but it has certainly not yet vanished, even in the most recent material we have collected, and even for positions of some responsibility.

When the term office girls includes only females of the same status and age as those referred to as office boys, then we can celebrate the fact that our language accurately represents gender equality in the workplace.

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