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Finalist

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Gender and Language: Half of the Workforce is Stereotyped

Can women relate to terms like “man-power” and “manning-up” or are terms like “diva”, “primadonna”, and “Debbie-downer” all they have to look up to? Gender-propelled terms have plagued the workplace for decades. According to the Women’s Bureau, women comprise 47% percent of the labor force in the United States. Somehow, though, they still face under-representation and harsh stereotypes at work. The biggest hurdle that women face in the workplace is male-dominated gendered language. The exclusivity of this language leaves women feeling neglected by their peers and bosses. Gender-based language, especially when it is male-dominated, is a major contributing factor to women’s inequity in the workplace.

All around the world, women are put at a disadvantage in the workplace due to the inhibiting language of their peers. The epidemic of gendered language has become increasingly obvious in developed countries, specifically America, and these countries have been pressured by women to change this statistic. Women are fighting back because, for decades, they have been misidentified at work and “people tend to feel bad when they are misidentified by others in whatever way that misidentification takes place” (Hameed). This is especially prevalent when women are bombarded by male-based pronouns and are subjected to more scrutiny based simply on their gender. Terms like “gentlemen’s agreement” and “right-hand man” essentially exclude women from the most important roles in their company, making them seem less trustworthy or

unable to land any deals. While women are not less competent, the language they are surrounded by certainly makes it seem so. The constant misidentification of women makes them feel dejected and often causes them to separate themselves from their coworkers. It is no longer a time when women are minimally present in the workforce; they make up almost half. Inclusion in the workforce is “a competitive advantage for American business” (Schawbel). Language should reflect the equity of the sexes, but instead it causes a greater rift between different gendered coworkers. It may be a competitive advantage for the workplace to make women feel included, but we have yet to see major changes to address this issue. The real problem isn’t just that this happens in the workplace, but that these stereotypes transcend the workplace to society as a whole. “Gender stereotypes are based on the traditional division of labor” (Hodel 1) and therefore any persisting stereotypes in the workforce serve to enforce the larger inequities throughout society. Language is a strong force and its subtleties can determine how others are perceived. Language that focuses on men essentially excludes women from that line of work, even if women make up the majority of it. “Language is an important vehicle for the transmission and maintenance of stereotypes” (Hodel 2) and has the power to eradicate stereotypes if used correctly. The issue is that masculine forms of language are used when referencing both genders, but feminine versions of the same words are only used to refer to females. This means that when referencing multiple people in the workplace, the masculine form is used almost all of the time (Hodel 3). Governments are becoming more aware of this linguistic issue due to the women’s rights movement and are beginning to combat it.

In countries where gender equality is ranked the highest, we see more focus on the way language is used in the workplace. In Australia, a large airway company named Qantas

encouraged their staff to use inclusive, or gender neutral language, with both their peers and their customers. They also encouraged them to think of typical ways in which they use gendered language and then focus on using language that is more gender-fair (Hameed). Hodel et al. took a different approach and analyzed countries that were known to be either social champions of gender equality or socially against gender equality. They used the job ads and compared them among the countries, focusing on how the language was used and whether it was gender-neutral or gendered. When viewing job titles and ads, the countries that were known to have more gender equality also had more gender-neutral job titles, the opposite was true for countries that were known to have less gender equality (Hodel 5). This was also true when viewing the job ads sorted by field of work. The gender unequal countries based jobs ads on gender, so the medical ads had female-based language and the construction ads had male-based language. While this would seem to benefit females since they are represented in the language of certain ads, limiting them to only specific fields of work contributes to gender stereotypes. The countries that were focused on gender equality in Hodel et al's study (Switzerland and Austria) had limited ads with male or female-based language, regardless of what the field of work was. Poland and the Czech Republic were the countries without any focus on gender equality and there was much separation and distortion among the genders when it came to job type and field. Job ads were geared toward one sex or the other and caused a rift between the sexes (Hodel 4). Gendered language in the workplace has a direct correlation to societal gender stereotypes. When viewing countries that have little in place to prevent gendered language, their society has deep gender stereotypes that limit the equality of the sexes. When viewing countries that aim to have gender-inclusive language in the workforce, the same is reflected in the equality of sexes in their society. To

combat societal stereotypes in countries where they persist, focus needs to be made in areas where men and women interact the most. This area is, most frequently, the workplace.

The direct correlation between gendered language and job-based stereotypes has also begun to translate to younger generations. Children are extremely perceptive and, even though they are not present in the labor force, associate certain jobs with certain genders due to the gendered language they interact with via entertainment. This would then show how the issue of gendered language affecting stereotypes in the workplace permeates throughout society; children are oftentimes not members of the labor force and, in most developed countries, cannot be members of the labor force. If this affects people who have little-to-no knowledge of the workforce, it will affect the entire society as a whole. The reason children are affected is because “sex imbalance remains in the occupational portrayal of men and women in books, film, and television” (Liben 810). The transcendence of this gender imbalance begins to prey on the youngest members of society. This will only continue to encourage gender stereotypes and gender inequality. Liben et al conducted a study in which they tested whether or not children would assign a gender to a job title (ex: ‘should’ this job be done by a man or a woman). When given job titles that were gender-neutral, a portion of the children (the ones who had been introduced to gender-based language) refused to believe that the job could be done by more than one sex. This would mean that those “children do not universally understand that gender-neutral titles are applicable to both men and women” (Liben 815). The decade long tradition of gendered job titles has affected the way children interact with these jobs, even if the title had been changed to a more gender-neutral one. The cycle will not be easy to break, but ending it now and consistently using gender-neutral language will even the playing field for women in the

workforce and in society. The children that had already been exposed to gender-neutral language were more likely to say both sexes could complete a job than say that only one sex could (Liben 815). The simple presence of this language completely changed how the children responded to the questions.

There is talk, however, that male-dominated language benefits females in the workforce. Developed countries, like America, are combating male-dominated language and are doing so by introducing more and more feminine job titles and feminine language throughout the workforce. It has already been discussed why male-dominated language can be harmful, so the prevalence of more female-dominated language seems like it would be a good counter for this problem. Formanowicz et al. refutes that claim that female-dominated language is beneficial to females in the workforce. They instead determined that male-dominated language may actually be better for females than female-dominated language. When feminine job titles were used, men who were interviewing these applicants were more likely to see them as unfavorable when in comparison to the masculine job titles. This would then hint that masculine job titles actually benefit women rather than hinder them in the workplace. These findings were also corroborated by Budziszewska et al., who were also able to determine that using feminine job titles hindered a woman's prospects of getting a job, or even getting to the interview portion of the job advertisement. "Women described as having feminine job titles were perceived as having lower status... than women described with a masculine title" (Budziszewska 682). While these studies both seem to refute that masculine language is harmful to the equality of language, it does not discuss gendered language as a whole. These interviewees were evaluated less favorably over a feminine job title because there was still the presence of male-dominated language in the system.

However, the equality of women will not come simply by using *more* gendered language than before, but by eliminating it entirely. It does not matter the gender, basing language off of any gender is going to be problematic because it only encourages the stereotypes related to each gender. A company benefits “when a job is open to members of both sexes... describing it by a common gender term is more accurate and more conducive to effective recruiting than using one title for men and another for women” (Miller & Swift 173). Essentially, to make the environment more inclusive, non-gendered language needs to be used over including both forms of gendered language.

Gendered language is highly problematic, especially when in use in the workplace. A job typically requires high levels of interaction with all genders, races, and beliefs. To plague this interaction with a patriarchal form of language puts the women at a steep disadvantage to their male counterparts. The excessive use of this patriarchal language also causes a hierarchy among the genders to develop. When teamwork and jobs that are done well are described with male terms, this connects men with power. On the opposite side, when drama and emotion in the workplace is described with female terms, women are connected with poor work ethic. This creates a hierarchy that puts women at a steep disadvantage to their male peers. Why leave out half of the workforce? To engage in a gender-neutral discussion would mean admitting that the workplace was biased beforehand; many companies do not want to admit that. Without a high level of job satisfaction, companies will receive mediocre work from the workers they fail to acknowledge, meaning potentially less profits. In the long run, gender-neutral language is mutually beneficial to all parties involved.

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