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Gender-Fair Language

A Primer

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GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE

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Sexism in Language

- **What Is Sexism in Language?**

It is the use of language which devalues members of one sex, almost invariably women, and thus fosters gender inequality.

It discriminates against women by rendering them invisible or trivializing them at the same time that it perpetuates notions of male supremacy.

- **Why the Concern about Mere Words?**

- **Language articulates consciousness**

It not only orders our thought but from infancy, we learn to use language to give utterance to our basic needs and feelings.

- **Language reflects culture**

It encodes and transmits cultural meanings and values in our society.

- **Language affects socialization**

Children learning a language absorb the cultural assumptions and biases underlying language use and see these as an index to their society's values and attitudes.

Social inequity reflected in language can thus powerfully affect a child's later behavior and beliefs.

- **What Are the Kinds of Sexist Language?**

- **Language that excludes women or renders them invisible**

The use of the generic masculine

Subsuming all humanity in the terms *man, father, brother, master*.

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<i>Current Usage ...</i>	<i>Alternative</i>
man person, individual	human being, human,
mankind, men	human beings, humans, humankind, humanity, people, human race, human species, society, men and women
working men, workmen	workers, wage earners
man on the street	average person, ordinary per- son, the common tao
forefather	ancestor
layman	layperson, nonspecialist, non- professional
manhood	adulthood, maturity
manning	staffing, working, running
to a man	everyone, unanimously, without exception
one man show	one person show, solo exhibition
founding fathers	founders
manpower	human resources, staff, person- nel, labor force
brotherhood of man	the family of humanity, the unity of people or of human kind, human solidarity
early man	early people, early men and women, early human beings,
statemanship	diplomacy
man-made	manufactured, synthetic, artificial
old masters	classic art/artists
masterful	domineering, very skillful

The Singular Masculine Pronouns "He," "His," "Him"

Examples:

When a reporter covers a controversial story, he has a responsibility to present both sides of the issue.

Each student should bring his notebook to class everyday.

Everyone packed his own lunch.

If a customer has a complaint, send him to the service desk.

The handicapped child may be able to feed himself.

Suggested Alternatives:

When reporters cover controversial stories, they have a responsibility ...

All students should bring their notebooks to class everyday.

Everyone packed a lunch.

Customers with complaints should be sent to the service desk.

Handicapped children may be able to feed themselves.

Terms ending in man to refer to functions that may be performed by individuals of either sex.

<i>Current Usage ...</i>	<i>Alternative ...</i>
anchorman	anchor, anchorperson
businessman	business executive, manager, business owner, retailer
cameraman	camera operators, cinematographers, photographers
chairman	chairperson,* chair

* There is a tendency to use "chairperson" to apply only to women while "chairman" is used for men, even though "chairperson" is applicable to both sexes. "Chairperson" is preferable for either sex.

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congressman	Representative, member of congress, congress member, legislator
craftsmen	artisans, craft artists, craftspersons
draftsmen	drafters
firemen	fire fighters
fishermen	fishers, fisherfolk
foremen	supervisors
lineman	line installer, line repairer
lumbermen	lumbercutters
pressmen	press operators
policeman	police officer, law enforcement officer
repairmen	repairers
salesman	salesperson, sales representative, sales agent
spokesman	spokesperson, representative
sportsmen	sports enthusiasts
spokesman	spokesperson, representative
sportsmen	sports enthusiasts
statesmen	diplomats, political leaders
watchmen	guards
weatherman	weather reporter, weathercaster, meteorologist

Terms used as though they apply to adult males only, or are appropriated to a particular sex

Examples:

Settlers moved west taking their wives and children with them.

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Alternative: Use "families" for "wives and children"

Farmers found their drought conditions difficult, and so did their wives.

Alternative: Use "spouses" for "wives"

It has been falsely said that the Greeks mistreated their wives.

Alternative: Use "Greek males"

People don't give up power. They'll give up anything else first, money, home, wife, but not power.

Alternative: Use "spouse" for "wife"

Farmers found their drought conditions difficult, and so did their wives.

Alternative: Use "spouses" for "wives"

The aboriginals dressed in feathered costumes and accented their faces with dyes. Women too painted their faces.

Alternative: Use "aboriginal men and women" for "aboriginals"; omit the second sentence.

<i>Current Usage ...</i>	<i>Alternative ...</i>
lawyers/doctors/ farmers and their wives	lawyers/doctors/ farmers and their spouses
the teacher and her students,	teacher and his or her students,* teachers and their students
the secretary and her boss	secretary and his or her boss,* secretaries and their bosses

The generic masculine reflects gender inequality in that women are never seen in terms of general or representative humanity. Men represent the universal or the human to which women are the other.

* Plural form preferred, unless you know the sex of the teachers or the secretary, in which case use the appropriate pronoun.

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- Language that trivializes women or diminishes their stature

Feminine suffixes such as *-ess*, *-ette*, *-trix*, or *-enne*, make unnecessary reference to the person's sex, suggest triviality, unimportance, or inferiority of women occupying such a position.

<i>Current Usage...</i>	<i>Alternative....</i>
actress	actor
authoress	author
aviatrix	aviator
comedienne	comedian
executrices	executors
heroines	heroes
hostesses	hosts
poetess	poet
proprietress	proprietor
suffragette	suffragist
usherette	usher

Use of sex-linked modifiers sounds gratuitous, is patronizing and suggests that the norm for some occupations is for a particular sex

<i>Current Usage ...</i>	<i>Alternative ...</i>
lady doctor, "doctora"	doctor
woman writer	writer
female lawyer	lawyer
girl athlete	athlete
male nurse	nurse
male secretary	secretary

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heroic women	heroes
working mothers	wage-earning mothers; mothers working outside the home
employed mothers	mothers working outside the home
working wives	wives working outside the home

Such modifiers imply that they are not real lawyers, doctors, nurses, workers, etc.

When it is necessary to point out the female aspect of a person occupying a given role or occupation, use "female" or "woman," rather than "lady," e.g. female guard.

- **Language which disparages and marginalizes women (or persons of another gender)**

<i>Current Usage...</i>	<i>Alternative....</i>
girl	adult female
salesgirls	saleswomen
ladies	women
fair sex, weaker sex	women
little woman, the better half	wife
coed	female college student
bachelor girl, spinster, old maid	unmarried women
starlets	aspiring actors
young girls	teenage women
girl Friday	administrative assistants
minority women	ethnic women

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mill girls	factory workers
hookers, whores	prostitutes
non-traditional or dominated occupations	female intensive occupations
ladies chattering	women talking, speaking, conversing
bag ladies	homeless women
chick	girl, woman (depending on age)
dykes, gay women, female homosexuals	lesbians
house husbands, house wives	homemakers
granny midwives	lay midwives, traditional midwives
fish wives	fish sellers
servants, maids	domestic helpers, household helpers
busboys	waiters' assistants
chambermaids	hotel workers
career girls	career women
male chauvinist pig	male chauvinism
women libbers	feminists, liberationists

• Language that fosters unequal gender relations

Lack of Parallelism

<i>Current Usage ...</i>	<i>Alternative ...</i>
Man and wife	husband and wife
men and girls	men and women; boys and girls

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men and ladies	men and women; ladies and gentlemen
President Bush and Mrs. Arroyo	President Bush and President Macapagal-Arroyo
Martina and Connors	Navratilova and Connors, or Martina and Jimmy
Connors and Miss Navratilova	Mr. Connors and Miss Navratilova

The use of terms that call attention to a person's sex in designating occupations, positions, roles, etc.

<i>Current Usage...</i>	<i>Alternative ...</i>
delivery boys,	deliverers, delivery men
motherhood, fatherhood	parenthood
political husbands,	political spouses, political wives
headmasters, headmistresses	principals
cowboys, cowgirls	ranch hands
traffic in women	sex tourism
girl watching	street harassment
bellman, bellboy	bellhop
clergyman	member of the clergy, minister, rabbi, priest, pastor, etc.
mailman, postman	mail carrier, letter carrier
fathers (religious)	priests
laundrywomen, washerwomen	launderers
chorus girls	chorus dancers
longshoremen,	longshore workers, stevedores

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cleaning women, cleaning lady	cleaners
stewardess, steward	flight/cabin attendant
corporate husbands, corporate wives	corporate spouses
domestic, maids, servants	household workers household help

- **Gender polarization of meanings in the use of adjectives**

Examples:

Forceful men are perceived as *charismatic* while forceful women are labeled *domineering*.

Light-hearted men are seen as *easygoing*, while women of the same nature are *frivolous*.

Forgetful men are called *absent-minded* while forgetful women are termed *scatterbrained*.

We describe angry men as *outraged*, while angry women are *hysterical*.

Men who are interested in everything are called *curious* people, while women with similar tendency are termed *nosy*.

Men of ordinary appearance go without mention, while women of ordinary appearance are labeled *plain* or *homely*.

Men who are thoughtful are called *concerned*, while women of the same type are *high strung*.

Men who are careful are *cautious* while their female counterparts are *timid*.

When men talk together, it is called a *convention*. But when women talk together, it is called *gossip*.

The terms *womanly*, *manly*, *feminine*, *masculine* depict each sex as being solely associated with particular attributes. Use adjectives that specify every shade of meaning. For example: *sensitive*, *determined*, *strong*, *nurturing*. They clarify as well as enrich one's use of language.

In the history of the English language, negative or sexually derogatory meanings accrue to words referring to woman but not to equivalent words for man.

Examples:

mistress

hostess

madam

hussy (this derogatory term for a woman has the same root as "housewife" and used to mean the mistress of the house)

matron—custodians, somebody who looks after a dorm versus "patron"—one who supports artists [see below].

• Lexical Gap

In the English language, there is an absence or lack of words that refer to women's experience, e.g.

Men are "henpecked" but women are not "cockpecked."

We refer to men's "virility" but there is no equivalent word for women's experience.

There is "patronage" but no "matronage."

• Hidden Assumptions

Compare these two statements:

Men can care for children just as well as women. (We find this statement wholly acceptable.)

Women can care for children just as well as men. (We find this strange or bizarre.)

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The disparity in our reactions to these two statements reflects our shared assumptions or our internalized model of the world we live in where women are locked in gender roles.

- **Metaphors which reflect a male-centered view of the world or portray women as objects**

Examples:

"Seminal," not "germinal" ideas.

Phallogentric metaphors:

We provide "input," we get the "thrust" of an argument, we "penetrate" a problem.

We "master" material.

Metaphors which refer to women as merchandise, something to be eaten: "sugar," "honey," "dish," "cheesecake" or as small animals: chick, bunny (e.g. playboy bunnies)

Guidelines for Non-Sexist Writing

- **Generic Man**

Problem

The term *man* is often associated with the adult male and it is difficult to distinguish its generic use. It reflects gender inequality in that women are never seen in terms of general or representative humanity but always in terms of their gender. *Man* represents the universe and the human while woman is the *other*.

Alternatives

1. Replace *man* with specific nouns or verbs that say explicitly what you mean:

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Use ...</i>
manpower	labor, human resources, personnel
to man	to operate

2. Use nouns that encompass both man and woman

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Use ...</i>
mankind	humanity

3. In making general statements, add *women*.

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Use ...</i>
Man is vulnerable.	Women and men are vulnerable.
Man is a rational being.	Women and men are rational beings.

• **The Pronouns “He” and “His”**

Problem

The pronouns *he* and *his* are used to replace generic man and pose the same problems.

Alternatives

1. The most common alternatives are *he or she*, *he/she*, *she or he* and lately, *s/he*. Too much of this can be awkward, so use the following alternatives (for nos. 2–9), whenever feasible.

2. The plural form may be substituted:

Instead of ...

Use ...

The student must submit his paper on time.

Students must submit their papers on time.

An employee must present his ID when entering the building.

Employees must present their ID when entering the building.

3. The first or second person may be used instead, when appropriate:

Instead of ...

Use ...

(examples in 2 above)

Please submit your papers on time.

Please present your ID when entering the building.

As a government employee, he faces the problem of low wages.

As government employees, we face the problem of low wages.

4. The pronoun *his* may be replaced by an article or dropped altogether

Instead of ...

Use ...

A researcher must acknowledge all his sources.

A researcher must acknowledge all sources.

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When the team leader submits his report, read it carefully.

When the team leader submits the report, read it carefully.

5. The pronoun *one* may be substituted when warranted by the text

Instead of ...

Use ...

The individual often wonders how he can help in this time of crisis.

One often wonders how one can help in this time of crisis.

6. The sentence may be recast in the form of an impersonal or passive construction:

Instead of ...

Use ...

(examples in 2 and 3 above)

Papers must be submitted on time.

All sources must be acknowledged.

The team leader's report must be read carefully.

When you have to use third person pronouns throughout a long text:

7. Use both female and male pronouns but vary the order.
8. Alternate male and female pronouns throughout the text
9. Repeat the noun or find a synonym

Examples:

Commission on Elections Resolution No. 2977

Section 1. *Certificate of Candidacy.*—

- (a) No person shall be elected President, Vice-President, Senator, Member of the House of Representatives, provincial, city or municipal official unless he files a certifi-

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cate of candidacy in the form prescribed by the Commission and within the period fixed herein.

- (b) No person shall be eligible for more than one office to be filled in the same election. If **he** files a certificate of candidacy for more than one office, **he** shall not be eligible for either. However, before the expiration of the period for the filing of certificate of candidacy, **he** may declare under oath the office for which *he* desires to be eligible and cancel the certificat of candidacy for the other office or offices.
- (c) A person who has filed a certificate of candidacy may, prior to the election, withdraw the same by submitting to the office concerned a written declaration of withdrawal under oath. The filing of withdrawal of certificate of candidacy shall not affect whatever civil, criminal or administrative liabilities which a candidate may have incurred.

(Sexist usage identified by bold print.)

Rewritten

Section 1. *Certificate of candidacy.*—

- (a) No candidate shall be elected President, Vice-President, Senator, Member of the House of Representatives, provincial, city or municipal official unless *that person* files a certificate of candidacy in the form prescribed by the Commission and within the period fixed herein.
- (b) No person shall be eligible for more than one office to be filled in the same election. *Anyone* who files a certificate of candidacy for more than one office shall not be eligible for either. However, before the expiration of the period for the filing of certificate of candidacy, *the candidate* may declare under oath the office for which *eligibility is desired* and cancel the certificate of candidacy for the other office or offices.
- (c) A person who has filed a certificate of candidacy may, prior to the election, withdraw the same by submitting to the office concerned a written declaration of with-

drawal under oath. The filing of a withdrawal of a certificate of candidacy shall not affect whatever civil, criminal or administrative liabilities which a candidate may have incurred.

- **Sex-Role Stereotyping**

Problem

Our language often has unconscious sexist assumptions, e.g. that surgeons are always men or nurses are always women or that women are weak and passive while men are aggressive and strong. These perpetuate stereotypes.

Alternatives

1. Identify both men and women in the same way when it comes to profession or employment:

Instead of ...

Use ...

stewardess, steward

flight attendant

poetess

poet

coed

student

"Doctora"

Doctor

male nurse

nurse

male prostitute

prostitute

2. Do not represent women or men as occupying only certain jobs or roles:

Instead of ...

Use ...

the kindergarten
teacher ... she

the kindergarten
teacher ... he

the engineer ... he

the engineer ... she

convention participants
and their wives

convention participants
and their spouses

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“mothers must see to it that their children bring snacks for recess” “parents must see to it ...”

3. Treat men and women in a parallel manner:

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Use ...</i>
President Ramos and Cory	former President Ramos and former President Aquino former Presidents Aquino and Ramos
Agassi and Steffie	Andre Agassi and Steffie Graf
Sampras and Venus	Pete Sampras and Venus Williams
man and wife	husband and wife

4. Avoid language that trivializes women and reenforces stereotyped images:

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>Use ...</i>
the president's girl Friday	the president's assistant
a man-sized job	a big job
She did well for a woman.	She did well.

5. Avoid language that calls attention to the sex or sex role of the referent, e.g. “working mothers” or “working wives.”

• Sexist Language in Quoted Material

Problem

What do you do when your secondary sources use sexist language?

Alternatives

1. Paraphrase the quote, using non-sexist language, and give the original author credit for the idea.

2. Quote directly and add sic after the sexist part.
3. Partially quote the material, rephrase the sexist part and name the source.

(Adapted from "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications" [Revised, 1985]. In *Women and Language in Transition*, edited by Joyce Penfield. New York: State University of New York Press, 1987.)

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Contextualizing Sexist Language

by Thelma B. Kintanar, Ph.D.*

More than simply discussing and illustrating sexism in language and giving examples of it, this essay hopes to contextualize it so as to awaken interest in something that should be of more general concern: *the attempt to erase all forms of discrimination against women, thus empowering them to make a full contribution to society.*

Sexism in language may be defined as the use of words and of discourse which discriminate against women by rendering them invisible at the same time that it perpetuates the notion of male supremacy. We find many familiar examples of sexism in the English language: the use of pronouns, particularly those in the third person such as *he* and of the generic masculine such as *man* to denote human beings of both sexes; the use of suffixes such as *-ess* (e.g. *authoress*, *poetess*) which has the effect of diminution and, it follows, of trivialization; the use of names and titles for women that define them not in their own right but in relation to men as in *Mrs.* and *Miss*. Consider some specific examples:

"The reader must decide for *himself*."

"Take it like a *man*."

"*Man* is mortal."

In utterances like the first, readers like me who happen to be female suffer a loss of identity. The second utterance, an injunction which may be addressed to women as well as to men, discriminates against women not just in what it says but in what it does not say—there is a whole world of implication in the phrase, "like a man" and its unstated but clearly implied opposite. The third example is a generalization which serves as the major premise of the classic example of the syllogism:

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Man is mortal.
John is a man.
John is mortal.

It's all very well to say John is a man and therefore John is mortal but what if we want to talk about John's wife, Marcia?

All men are mortal.
Marcia is a man ...

Wait a minute, Marcia is not a man; she is a woman as she knows only too well by having borne all the babies in the family and as she is reminded all too often by having to do all the domestic chores, day in and day out. So she vehemently refuses to be called a man, even for a syllogistic purpose.

Besides, she doesn't mind sharing man's mortality. What she doesn't want is to be invisible. We can call this "the fallacy of the invisible middle" but clearly, we're talking here not about logic but about language and the ridiculous lengths to which we can draw out the use of the generic masculine. Facetiousness aside, by using the word man to represent the whole of humanity, men come to think of themselves as representative humanity; women don't count, even though they represent half of the world's population. The *generic masculine* thus becomes the *preferential masculine* and as one male critic himself acknowledges, "Because the masculine is aligned so frequently with the universal, men are able to conceive of their own subjectivity as being non-gendered and therefore wonder why feminists make such a fuss about gender" (Ruthven 1984: 64).

Why make a fuss about gender? First, because whether we like it or not, the concept of gender is in language. In Spanish and other romance languages, for instance, we classify nouns according to gender as masculine, feminine, neuter. Even when we talk about the sounds of words, as in English prosody, we refer to "masculine" rhymes (words which end on unstressed syllables). In some cultures such as the Japanese, male and female speakers have to use different forms of the same language. There is thus no escaping gender in language.

Surely, some will say, there is no lack of significant issues having to do with discrimination against women and/or women's equality. Why bother about a few words, a little thing like language? Because words are not insignificant and language is far from being a small

thing. Language is a major part of culture; it not only reflects culture but helps to shape, develop and transmit it. As one linguist puts it:

The meanings of the words in a language are the community's store of established knowledge. A child learns the values and preoccupations of its culture largely by learning the language: language is the chief instrument of socialization, which is the process by which a person, willy-nilly, moulded into conformity with the established system of beliefs of the society into which she/he happens to be born. Language gives knowledge and allows knowledge to be transmitted from person to person. But the knowledge is traditional, not innovative, for language is a stabilizing, stereotyping, mode of communication. (Fowler 1986: 19)

Note that the important role of language in culture has a negative as well as positive implications. Keeping this in mind, I would like to try to contextualize sexism by focusing on three key words in the above statement: culture, socialization, stereotyping.

First, *culture*. In the Philippines, what does it mean to say that we learn the values and preoccupations of our culture largely by learning the language? Such a statement is mired in profound irony and contradiction. Because, up to this time, the language we learn and use, at least in school, is not our own but that of another culture. We cannot deny, of course, that modern Philippine culture is a hybridized sort of culture and that many of the values, attitudes and behavior patterns which comprise it were imposed on us by two Western powers in 400 years of colonization. Many of these values we have since internalized and we now see them as our own. Furthermore, these values are in a large measure the values of a patriarchal order. Patriarchy or the dominance of men over women in society has been handed down to us by our colonizers and even the languages we have learned from them encode these patriarchal values and attitudes. Because the present form of patriarchy in our society came to us from the West we have to look briefly at its development in western society.

Economic changes brought about by the rise of industrialization and the emergence of capitalism from the seventeenth century onward shifted production away from the home to the workplace. Home and family became essentially a center for the reproduction of workers and the consumption of goods. Women's work at home was devalued and they became more economically dependent on men. These led to the ideology of domesticity in which the woman's role

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was seen primarily as custodian of the home and family. Political development also resulted in shifts of power.

With the dismantling of feudalism, the elite took over the powers marginally assumed by feudal lords. Allegiance of private individuals shifted from the feudal lord to the state; at the same time the idea of the nuclear family was given more importance, thus reinforcing the power of the husband over the wife (Andersen 1983).

With these economic and political developments, patriarchy moved from the private to the public sphere, beyond the family to the state. In a patriarchal state, all women, whether or not they are a part of a family, are subject to a patriarchal order. Thus social services and institutions such as education, law, labor, health and reproductive policies are all controlled by men even though they most greatly affect women and children. A look at contemporary Philippine society will confirm this, where, for instance, there is an ongoing controversy between church and state (both male dominated if not solely male) as to who will determine population and, therefore, reproductive policy while the women who are most affected are least consulted, if at all. It is in the context of patriarchy that we talk of language as encoding and transmitting values and attitudes.

Next, *socialization*. Socialization is the process by which we learn to live in our societies; more specifically, according to the sociologists, it is the process by which social roles are learned. Socialization begins from the moment we are born and continues throughout our adult life. It is a form of social control in that: "First, it gives us a definition of ourselves. Second, it defines the external world and our place within it. Third, it provides a definition of others and our relationships with them" (Andersen 1983: 63).

For women in a patriarchal society such as ours, defining ourselves consists in large measure in acquiring a gender identity. It is necessary at this point to make distinctions among several sets of words:

sex-gender
nature-culture
female-feminine

By sex we mean biological sex which has to do with the genetic and physical sexual identity of a person. Members of the female sex

are determined genetically by the presence of two xx chromosomes in their genetic coding. In addition they have certain physical characteristics such as the possession of a womb and mammary glands. Thus they are able to bear the young of the species.

The concept of gender, on the other hand, refers to "socially learned behaviors and expectations that are associated with the members of a biological sex" (Andersen 1983: 25). It is a social identity which does not necessarily emerge from one's biological sex. For instance, there are cases where the biological sex is unclear, as in the case of hermaphroditism, but where gender identity may emerge quite clearly (e.g. some babies born with their sexual anatomy improperly differentiated are socialized into a specific gender identity and display all the characteristics of that gender). In sum, then, biological sex is due to nature but gender is due to culture. Biological sex is inborn; gender is acquired. When we say that women are naturally weak, passive or delicate we are not saying anything about biology which is the only natural thing, but are reflecting our socialization, part of which is to regard these traits as "natural," as if they emerged from our biological sex.

In addition to helping us define ourselves in terms of gender ideology, socialization also defines our external world and our relationships therein. Thus female children learn early that women's place is in the home. They are made to stay home and play with domestic toys while boys are sent out to play outdoor games. Men are perceived as working outside while women stay home. We use this clearly in children's primers which go something like this: "This is Mother. She stays home and takes care of Baby. This is Father. He goes to work." In all these, we see language playing a major role as a chief instrument of socialization.

It should be noted, however, that language systems per se do not seem to be inherently sexist. It is not so much the linguistic system of phonological, syntactic and logical structures that reproduces gender ideology but language as used within a specific culture. One way it does this is by encoding stereotypes. The stereotyping function of language contributes to sexism by putting women in linguistic molds and containing them there. A typical exercise in gender dynamics asks various people, both men and women, to list down words which describe women and men. The words used to describe women invariably add up to what we might call a feminine stere-

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otype: delicate, spiritual, loving, emotional, gentle, etc., in the same way that the words used to describe men are stereotypically masculine.

Stereotyping, however, is an extremely reductive practice. By oversimplifying, it hinders understanding, blinding us to the complexities of a situation or a sector of society and the individuals who comprise it. It lends itself to manipulative purposes as in the case of Marcos' propaganda campaign where he described his opponent as a woman, weak and soft, unsuitable for the presidency which is man's work. More harmful because more insidious is the effect stereotyping has on women's perception of themselves. By constantly being spoken of as passive, limited in their roles and capabilities, they come to accept a devalued image of themselves, thus making them vulnerable and easy targets not only for manipulation but exploitation.

Sexism in language is therefore not an isolated social practice which disgruntled feminists with their shrill, strident voices (note the stereotyping here) make a lot of fuss about. It is not much ado about nothing. Seen in the context of a patriarchal culture and the gender ideology it reproduces, it emerges as a basic and important issue.

Secondly, however, much as we recognize intellectually, the existence of sexism, we should not allow our own linguistic practice to go unexamined, whether in our day-to-day conversation or in our reading, writing and other serious intellectual pursuits.

Lastly, whenever we become aware of sexism in language, we should make a genuine effort to change it, in the interest of gender fairness in our society. Feminist or not, we are concerned with language and the manipulative and discriminatory purposes for which it can be used.

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