

Gender-sensitive Communication

Using different adjectives for women and men

Sometimes in English different adjectives are used to describe the same feature in men and women. There are also some words which – despite not having an explicit gender – have strong connotations that are strongly associated with only women or men.

This stems from the fact that some character traits, such as being ambitious, are considered by society attractive in men but negative in women.

Tip: When describing a characteristic of a woman, ask yourself, ‘would I ever use this word to describe a man?’ (and vice versa). If not, then look for a term without gender connotations.

Semantic non-equivalence

These are words in English that are supposed to be equivalent, but actually the female versions of the words have gained negative connotations over the years. You should think carefully about the connotations of words before using them. For example, consider:

- governor - governess
- master - mistress
- patron - matron
- sir - madam
- bachelor - spinster
- host - hostess

It is not always easy to spot when adjectives are promoting gender stereotypes. The examples in the table below show some words to look out for and to avoid using to describe women.

Adjectives with gender connotations to avoid

Adjectives commonly used for women (derogatory)	Better language
Bossy or pushy	Assertive
Loose	Having sexual confidence –no male equivalent
Emotional or hormonal	Passionate, enthusiastic, empathetic
Ditzy	Silly
Frigid	Lacking sexual responsiveness –no male equivalent
Frumpy	Dowdy and old fashioned
Shrill	High pitched, grating voice
Hysterical	Irrational