

# Sexism as Rank Language

Language is symptomatic of attitudes, and in the process of any encounter between people, language issues inevitably emerge. Not only in awareness training, but in any meeting—team, task, committee, business or social gathering—the same sorts of comments are likely to be made, the same terms likely to recur. Sexist language seems to be universally predictable.

The most common practice in sexist terminology is calling a *woman* a *girl*. The examination of this term, especially as the investigation pertains to its usage in the work-place, yields a number of implications illustrated by my adaptation of the transactional analysis model. The diagram below illustrates the TA\* formula *parent/adult/child* modified to *father/man/boy* and *mother/woman/girl*.

When a man calls a woman a *girl*, he places his association in that relationship as either *father* or *boy*. If he wishes to establish a relationship that is on the adult-male to adult-female level, he must consider a relationship which would be on an equal basis—that is, *man* to *woman*. Every other relationship possible has implications of rank (except boy-girl relationships, which have implications of play appropriate perhaps to a social situation but inappropriate to a work situation).

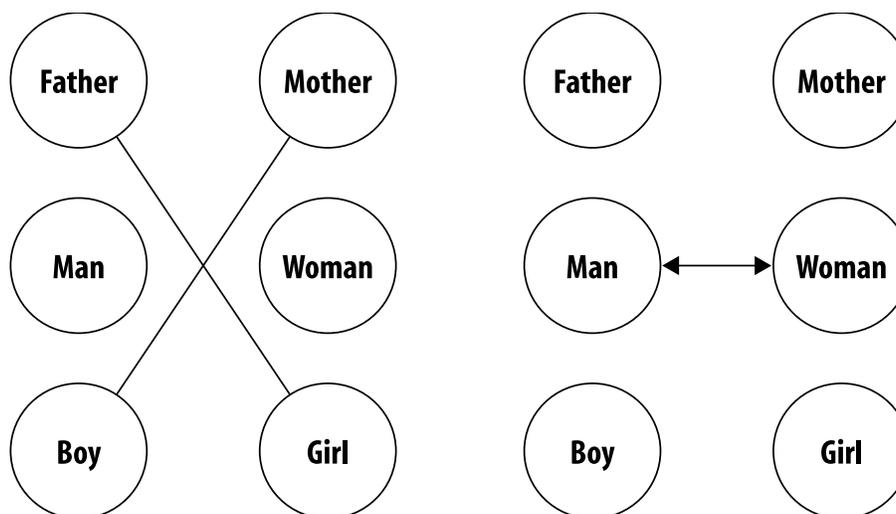
In actual practice, the natural linkages occur so spontaneously and change so rapidly that they are often hard to analyze and certainly often difficult to manage. If a male falls into the *father* role, the response most likely is the emergence of the female's *girl*. If he falls into the *boy* role, most of the time he will engage her *girl*. The female, while not forced into such roles, is nevertheless most likely to respond naturally and automatically to the implicit invitation in the male behavior. In any case,

the woman's demotion to *girl*, if she allows it, strips her at once, symbolically (and may do so in a practical sense as well), of her power and competence. The productivity of a work transaction is diminished when the interchange is not that of a man and woman relating to each other as peers. A peer relationship is the only relationship which keeps the power equally apportioned and the emotional field relatively free of distracting sexual overtones.

Clearly, of course, what is at issue is power. A *woman* is a female who has a sense of her own identity and personal power, as well as a sense of her sexuality. A *girl* is an immature female, a child, whose sexuality is not threatening. The very word *woman* carries, for most men, the connotation that the girl has moved beyond initiation and has come into a certain amount of power—power based on a number of factors, including competency and sexuality (security about her identity as a woman), as well as economic and/or social self-sufficiency. When a man enters into a transaction with a *woman*, he tries to set up interpersonal parameters

that are manageable. He may deal more comfortably and naturally from a position of elevation above her status—from *father*. Or, he may deal more comfortably from a position below her rank—of *boy* to *mother*. Either role is a natural one for him to carry on with a woman. *Girl* keeps the sexual aspect out of the relationship and keeps the power securely with the father. *Boy* to *mother* keeps the power for the man, too, because while mothers may be directive, they are not usually directive in one's workaday world. The more business-like *man-woman* relationship affirms both identity and power of the woman, and changes totally the nature of the transaction. The horizontal, non-ranked *man-woman* transaction, while clearly the most productive and efficient available, is often, to the bewilderment of the mature, efficient, competent woman in the working world, the most threatening to a man.

A male may enter most naturally into essentially flirtatious relationships with his female coworkers, and he may resist a woman's efforts to



\*Transactional Analysis

keep the relationship on a non-ranked, *man-woman* basis. If he succeeds in being seductive, either the woman enters into a daughter relationship or he descends into the boy's role, so that the two of them are then "playing" *boy-girl*. A brief movement into such roles, so long as the movement occurs by mutual agreement "between two consenting adults," is all right and may be pleasant for both persons. It is the "seduction" of one member of the pair by the other into a role not appropriate for the work relationship that I question here. A man entering into such an archaic (for the workplace) transaction loses productivity and efficiency. The power and productivity of a work transaction between a man and a woman comes when the man is relating to a woman as a peer and according her the respect for her technical competence he would accord to any man.

Enter now the villain—sexist language. A man who calls a *woman* a *girl* in the work situation—and this use of language is by no means uncommon—demeans her at once. She will either accept the language and its implications (destroying her power and probably her efficacy), or resist, draining her energies away from the task. Language is one of the most important of all our societal acknowledgements of rank. Language affirms the transition from *boyhood* to *young-manhood* and from *girlhood* to *young-womanhood*. By referring to a young male who is developing toward manhood as a *young man*, we acknowledge and support his process of maturation and empowerment. The same holds true for a young woman. If a girl who is emerging into young-womanhood is called

a *young woman*, she too is affirmed in *her* process of maturation and empowerment. In our society, however, because of residual sexist attitudes which exist *especially* in the workplace, it is quite common for a woman to be called a *girl* long past the time when she has, by reason of maturity, responsibility, and role, become a woman. This is particularly likely to happen to her if she is a secretary or occupying some other role traditionally assigned to a woman (as in "the girls in the typing pool," or "the girl who does the billing"), or if she is supervised by a man who finds it advantageous to keep her in a role of subordination. But neither industry nor society can afford the loss of women's contributions such language reflects. A *girl* is a dependent; a *woman* is a fully-functioning, independent, working partner.

As women move into new occupational roles, men are showing signs of anxiety, manifested usually as irrational attitudes in their responses to women. The calling of women "*girls*" is just one symptom of that anxiety. For some men, giving up the practice of calling a woman a girl is traumatic. Many men, having heard (in the fullest sense of the word) from women with whom they work that the term girl is demeaning and annoying, still do not want to give it up. Why men give up the term with such difficulty is certainly open to conjecture, and many hypotheses have been formulated to attempt an explanation. Apparently, however, the major difficulty for men in all this is that a change in the role of women, and in the language which recognizes that change, demands a change in the role of men—for the quite simple

reason that one's own role is relative to that of one's partner in a transaction. Further, when stripped of the familiar and "natural" roles he would ordinarily use in dealing with a woman, a man may experience a real sense of anger and loss. He needs to respond from his role as competent-male (man), addressing his partner as competent-female (woman), but he is likely to have no experience in doing so and therefore resorts to the father or boy role during the transaction—the ones he knows best and is most comfortable with. A male faces new problems with his own identity as a man when he has to recognize, through non-sexist language, a woman as an empowered person in the work-place.

While some men may know instinctively that they may derive some productivity from either the loyalty generated in the *girl-father* transaction, they do not assess sufficiently the inefficiency generated by language that fosters dependency and immature responses from female co-workers. When a man calls a woman with whom he works a *girl*, he diminishes the possibility of a more powerful and efficient working atmosphere.

Although men *need* to give up the old, instinctive responses to women, particularly with reference to the language they use to describe women, nobody could reasonably suppose that it would be easy for them to do so. They have been asked to behave rationally in response to women in the work-place, but a rational response in reference to women, with whom their responses may have been predominantly emotional/sexual, is not easy to achieve. Typically, men have related to women in

the work-place from their father and/or boy roles. When women in the work-place ask for language—the outward sign of an inner attitude—that is non-sexist and non-ranked, a man may feel the need to re-examine his attitudes and language in his other male/female relationships—most notably the relationship with his wife.

The TA model serves to call attention to the ranking that sexist language fosters and its impact on fully-functioning work relationships. It is clear that non-ranking language is a powerful tool in facilitating attitudinal and behavioral change in men *and* women wherever they encounter each other.