

“Madam Chairman, Sir...!”

“MAY I come in, Sir ?”

I look at the person wanting to come in. Yes, he can see. His eyes don't look heavy with blindness.

I look at myself. Do I look so masculine that the man cannot make out my sex? Inspite of my “manly” demeanour and mannerisms, which are not really manly, but the behavioural symptoms of a rational and efficient human being, I find I look feminine enough. People don't dismiss me as a sexless apology for a female.

Then why on earth can't this man and many others who come to my office say, “May I come in, madam?” Perhaps it is his inadequate English... I want for him to speak a few sentences. No, no, his English is not so bad after all. Then what the hell is it?

Is it that he is not used to seeing women in offices, or at least not in executive chairs? Inspite of all the statistics quoted about so many Indian women being in this job, so many in that, so many in politics, in the foreign services, and all the eloquent pronouncements about the sanctity attached to womanhood in our country, this poor man has not seen many women whose permission has to be sought before entering their offices. For him, the deity in the office must of course be a God of male sex and gender. Now, when he does see a woman why can't he call a woman a woman ?

It must be easier to call a spade a spade than to call a woman in a position of power a woman. That is why women presiding at meetings are referred to as “madam chairman”! (What is she now – a man, a woman or both or neither?) That is why Indira Gandhi was called “The

only man in the cabinet! The she king of India”! That is why well-known women artists have to do “one man shows”! That must surely require them to effect an instantaneous sexual transformation!

The reason for addressing a clear-cut woman as “sir” could also be that the poor souls are confused. So totally confused because they come to an office without the least expectation of finding a woman in the seat, and therefore do not know how to behave when confronted by such an unlikely situation! They extend their hand, then withdraw it



– shaking hands with a woman! No, no ! Namaste will surely do – or just a smile.

While talking to us, they don't know where to look. They only look at us from some slinking side-angle, usually with a sense of guilt, because after all, we are women. Straight looks and straight conversation are strictly for men and between men only.

If they are not aware of my marital status, the poor fellows are even more confused. “Now, is this woman a Miss or Mrs ?” If I had been a man, it would have been simple – A Mr, everyone knows, is a Mr., whether married, single or divorced. The use of Ms. For women should solve this problem, but one wonders if there is enough common sense around for such an unthinkable innovation to be accepted with equanimity. Confusion, confusion... confusion...

This confusion is so compounded that it confounds me. The other day there was this (informally worded) invitation from a very well known cultural organization. It read : “Come to our variety show with wife and children.” I didn't quite know how to comply with the request. The invitation was obviously meant for married men only! But it had been sent to women principals of women's colleges, to women inspectors of schools, etc., etc.

Would an Indian husband, or, for that matter, any husband, like to accompany his wife to a show with such an invitation in his wife's hand? He would rather die than allow himself to be so “insulted”. Yet another invitation addressed to me came with the dress specification, “Lounge Suit”, which almost prompted me to buy a lounge suit for myself.

It is even more reprehensible when women themselves send out invitations, appeals, circular letters beginning with “dear sir” only. These madams forget that the recipients of their letters could also be women.

I have attended so many meetings where the chairperson has started the business by saying “Well, gentlemen...”

Everytime I hear that, I say, “No, this can’t be true. This *gentleman* cannot be so rude or so dumb as to ignore and deny me my female existence!!”

If it was a slip of the tongue, I would not mind, but I know it is the slip of a culture, the slip of a whole civilization. It is not the language which we women and men (there are many men who also desire these changes) are after. It is this culture, this way of thinking in which all of us, men and women, are trapped, that we want to change.

I am not one of those who would go to an extreme and insist that the world “human” be “huperson”, “history” be “theirstory” and so on. I was taught that in the English language. Man when written with a capital M means a person, whether male or female, belonging to the human race. But I was also taught that man with a small means a male person. I am not suggesting that we change the English language (although I attach no sanctity to languages, for they are nothing but reflections of cultures, social relationships and value systems); all I am saying is that we should use the language accurately.

There is no dearth of examples of incorrect usage of language. While talking of a citizen, a farmer, a worker, a child, people often use the pronoun “he”, as if all citizens, farmers, workers, children are male. It is understood, it is said, that “he” includes “she”. Is it? If anything includes anything, it is s-h-e which include h-e, f-e-m-a-l-e which includes m-a-le, and w-o-m-a-n which includes m-a-n. The words “chairman”, “spokesman”, “sportsman”, were not so incorrect when there were hardly any women playing these roles. But now when more and more women are entering public life, isn’t it necessary that we change the language to reflect the realities?

Some people argue that the word “brotherhood” includes both men and women. Now isn’t that really being stubborn? From here you go on to say “father” includes “mother”, “son” includes “daughter”, “uncle” includes “aunt”. If this was so, why in God’s name (God also happens to be thought of as a father, who, according to the Christian faith, happened to have a son called Jesus, who just happened to have twelve

apostles, all male...), all I ask is, why did it happen that we women were created by God in this male world?

Couldn’t he have done without us? (After all, we have only created confusion, starting with crafty Eve misleading innocent Adam!) Was it just by chance that words for males were used for both males and females, but the words for females never used for both males and females? Or wasn’t it because most cultures in the world have been male-dominated?

If words like “chairman” and “fellowman” are usable for both men and women, why is it necessary to call a woman who washes clothes “washerwoman” rather than “washerman”. Is the “man” in “washerman” different from the “man” in “chairman”?

The reason why we do not suggest that a woman in the chair be called “Chairwoman”, is because the sex of the person is irrelevant to the work being done. A word like “chairperson” or “speaker” can be used logically for both men and women, and so let us use it. There have however, been words, which in my opinion, can and should be used for both men and women, but have been unnecessarily feminized.

For example, whoever inspects in an inspector, who authors is an author, a person who writes poetry is a poet, just as a person who paints is a painter, whether male or female. But here the “fathers” of the English language were condescending and coined words like “inspectress”, “authoress”, “poetess” which connote the inferiority attached to women entering male domains. This is what I call misconceived condescension. (But I do not blame fathers for misconception. How should the poor fellows know how to conceive!)

The issues here discussed might sound trite and inconsequential. But the attitudes expressed in language and the impact they have on the human psyche cannot be so easily dismissed. As we try to change the role of women in society, it is also necessary to change the image of women in our daily language. □