

## Gender-Biased Language of the Workplace

**Oksana O. Stroi**<sup>✉</sup>

Walden University, Minneapolis, USA

✉oxana.stroi@gmail.com

**Introduction.** The World Economic Forum reports that in 2018 only 34 % of managerial positions globally were occupied by women, and the wage gap between male and female employees constitutes 63 % on average with only 67 % of women doing paid jobs. While there are multiple economic, social and cultural reasons why women are not being employed or promoted, the goal of the present study is to look at the linguistic biases hindering women's careers. We will be looking at the previous research devoted language of job advertisements, resumes, job interviews, letters of recommendation and performance reviews in order to uncover the gender-specific language and its possible effect on women's employability and analyzing the language of the public professional recommendations.

**Methodology and sources.** We looked at the research devoted to the gender-biased language in the workplace in the last ten years which helped us to formulate three hypotheses. Then we tested these hypotheses against the data we collected from 80 public professional profiles of male and female managers. Our goal was to discover quantitative differences in usage of communal and agentic terms in reference to men and women.

**Results and discussion.** Confirming previous findings we found out that the difference in usage of agentic terms is statistically significant across genders. Men are more often described as "leaders", "mentors", and "achievers" and attributed sense of humor than women. On the other hand, communal terms are equally used for both male and female managers.

**Conclusion.** The gendered language can be found in all texts related to recruitment and promotion and maybe one of the reasons for the professional gender-gap. Continuous research on the topic and bringing awareness to human resource professionals and career coaches may be helpful in improving inclusion and diversity especially in higher management of the companies and in academia.

**Key words:** gender bias, gendered language, organizational psychology, human resources, social linguistics, agentic, communal, leadership.

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## Гендерные различия в текстах профессиональных рекомендаций

О. О. Строй<sup>✉</sup>

Уолденский университет, Миннеаполис, США

<sup>✉</sup>oxana.stroi@gmail.com

**Введение.** По данным Всемирного экономического форума на 2018 г. женщины занимают лишь 34 % управленческих позиций в компаниях по всему миру. Средняя разница в зарплатах между мужчинами и женщинами составляет 63 %, и лишь 67 % женщин занимаются оплачиваемым трудом. Можно назвать множество причин – социальных, культурных и экономических, – по которым женщины не могут устроиться на оплачиваемые должности или преуспеть в карьере, однако в данной статье обсуждаются гендерные особенности профессиональных текстов, как одна из возможных причин. Мы проведем анализ существующих исследований в области гендерной лингвистики, посвященных резюме, объявлениям о работе, профессиональным рекомендациям и оценкам.

**Методология и источники.** Статья резюмирует исследования в гендерной лингвистике профессиональных текстов на английском языке за последние 10 лет. Используя полученные данные, мы сформулируем и протестируем гипотезы об использовании коммунальной и агентской лексики в рекомендациях менеджеров среднего и высшего звена.

**Результаты и обсуждение.** Анализ подтверждает, что существуют значительные различия в профессиональных текстах, описывающих мужчин и женщин, занимающих равнозначные позиции. Мужчин чаще характеризуют как лидеров и говорят об их достижениях и чувстве юмора. Женщин описывают как трудолюбивых исполнителей. Мы не отметили значительной разницы в использовании коммунальных терминов между описаниями мужчин и женщин.

**Заключение.** Гендерные различия в профессиональных текстах являются одной из возможных причин, препятствующих карьерному развитию женщин. Данное исследование может быть полезным не только для социологов, но и для профессионалов в области набора и развития персонала, консультантов и менеджеров компаний.

**Ключевые слова:** гендерная лексика, дискриминация по признаку пола, гендерные исследования, социолингвистика, управление персоналом.

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**Introduction.** The World Economic Forum [1] reports that in 2018 only 34 % of managerial positions globally were occupied by women, and the wage gap between male and female employees constitutes 63 % on average with only 67 % of women doing paid jobs. While these numbers vary between the countries, the progress to close this gap is slow and will take over 100 years at this pace [ibid]. While there are multiple economic, social and cultural reasons for why women are not being employed or promoted, the goal of the present study is to look at the linguistic biases hindering women's careers. We will be looking at the language of job advertisements, resumes, job interviews, letters of recommendations and performance reviews in order to uncover the gender-specific language and its possible effect on women's employability.

*Problem overview and goals of the research.*

Achieving gender equality in education and work is one of the central goals of the United Nations [2]. It makes sense that gender bias is one of the most popular topics of social research. Gender-based bias can hinder women from achieving higher managerial positions or making a career in traditionally masculine occupations such as engineering, science, and information technology [3]. The World Economic Forum [1] reported a 74 % gender gap in technical professions, with an even bigger gap in emerging areas such as Artificial Intelligence. Women continue dominating in lower-paid professions and in addition to that are expected to take up more domestic tasks.

The social role theory explains that sex differences are coming from the traditional division of labor: men were supposed to be resistant, fast and brave in order to provide for their families, and women were supposed to stay home and take care of children. As a result, the men are expected to be agentic (that is, they speak assertively, behave proactively, influence others, be competitive, control the situation), and women are perceived as communal (that is helping others, maintaining relationships, displaying kindness and sympathy). In addition to that, it is important to understand that people are not only described according to gender stereotypes, but also are expected to behave according to them, which can negatively affect a woman's chance for a managerial position [4]. It has been repeatedly shown in the research we will be discussing further, that men are more frequently discussed in agentic terms (e. g., intelligent, exceptional, leader), while women in communal terms (e. g., compassionate, friendly, calm). The latest analysis of media shows, that it is more typical to describe men as "decisive" and goal-oriented, while women, no matter how much she achieved, is more frequently discussed in ambiguous emotional words [5].

Gender bias or sexism studies have been gaining popularity since the 1960s when they were fueled by the rise of feminist movements. A sexist understanding is that a woman as more suited for nurturing occupation such as caring for children and cooking than working outside the house, more caring and emotional while a man is supposed to be a provider and a leader [6]. While it may seem that sexism is originating from the male view of the world and the desire of men to dominate, in reality, gender inequality is actively supported by women's beliefs in traditional roles. The system justification theory research showed that women are playing an active part in maintaining the subordinate positions towards men by emphasizing their traditional feminine qualities and idealizing patriarchal system [7]. While these trends are not as pronounced in less traditional societies, as we will see from the research below, women's behaviors (including linguistic behaviors) uncover the difference in upbringing between men and women that makes women appear weaker and less competent. Studies show that women tend to characterize themselves in more communal terms, as less assertive and less of a leader, in comparison with characterizing other members of the same group, both men and women [8].

**Methodology and sources.** While the traditional understanding of family with one male breadwinner is close to extinct in the modern western society, the stereotypes about the male and female image are deeply rooted in our minds and reflected in the choice of language used to describe men and women in everyday conversations, media, fiction, and professional texts. Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay refer to gendered wording in employment-related texts as "unacknowledged, institutional-level mechanism of inequality maintenance" in male-dominated professions [9, p. 109]. When we are talking about employment-related studies, letters of recommendation have probably been the most researched topic since the 1980s [4, 10–12].

A number of studies looked at the words in the job description that discourage female candidates to apply for a position [5, 9, 13]. The impact of the language female candidates use to describe themselves during the job interviews and in their job applications has a pronounced effect on how they are perceived by the recruiting managers [3, 14, 15]. And finally, the chances of women making a career is influenced by the language used by their colleagues and managers in their performance reviews and informal appraisals [5, 16, 17].

The goal of the current article is to review the latest research of gendered language in employment-related texts and to collect the main findings. Using this basis, we will analyze peer-reported professional evaluations of male and female managers to understand the extent to which gender-bias exists in these types of texts. The value of the present research is the broader view on multiple types of texts in the context of employment and the ability of correlative analysis of peer and self-perception of a working individual, as well as first of a kind analysis of public professional recommendations. The present paper can be used in formulating advice for human resource professionals, career advisors, managers, and job applicants in terms of using gender-neutral language in employment and workplace-related texts.

*The overview of existing research.*

While the research of the gendered language started in the second half of the second century, we will be analyzing the studies done in the last ten years. As the language is evolving, new professions and skills are emerging, and the women are becoming more economically active than ever, we feel that the research done earlier may not be relevant anymore. Most of the articles are based on the examples in the English language.

*Gender bias in job advertisements.*

According to the latest study by the social network for job seekers LinkedIn, the word choices used by companies to describe their work environment, vacancies and requirements for employees, can attract or disengage potential candidates. For example, 44 % of women (as opposed to 33 % of men) will avoid applying for jobs that contain “aggressive” in their description, and one in four women will not apply for a job that is characterized as “demanding”. On the other hand, women would be more likely to respond to the vacancies including communal personal characteristics such as “likable” and “supportive”.

Danielle Gaucher, Justin Friesen, and Aaron Kay [9] looked at randomly sampled job advertisements to reveal the presence of gender-bias in traditionally masculine occupations such as plumber (1 % women), electrician (2 %), mechanic (2 %), engineer (11 %), security guard (23 %), and computer programmer (26 %). The authors found that words like “leader”, “competitive”, and “dominant” were to a greater extent used in male-dominated professions. At the next stage of their research, they constructed job advertisements that included more masculine wording and found that women were less likely to apply for such jobs as they were perceived as intended for men.

Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research in 2017 [13] looked at the usage of gender-neutral versus gender-specific job-titles in the job advertisements in four European countries: Austria, Switzerland, Poland, and the Czech Republic. The results showed a correlation between socioeconomic gender equality and the usage of gender-fair job titles. In more hierarchical countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, it is more typical to use gender-specific (feminine or masculine) job titles in comparison to Switzerland and Austria. Interestingly, for the female-dominated areas (such as nursing) and gender-equal fields (such as economics), it was

more typical to use gender-neutral titles than for male-dominated industries (such as construction), which further contributes to fostering stereotypes at the workplace.

*Gender-bias in letters of recommendation.*

Letters of recommendations can have significant implications for one’s career, especially in academic and medical fields. Thus, this is a fairly well-researched topic in these contexts.

A 2018 study in Nebraska Medical center looked at the difference between the letters of recommendation given to male and female applicants to transplant surgery fellowship as one of the possible reasons why more than 80 % of American transplant surgeons are men [11]. To check for the unconscious bias, the authors analyzed 311 letters, noting the usage of communal versus agentic terms (Table 1), the length of the text, and mentioning the family life of the candidate.

Table 1. Agentic and Communal Terms

Communal Terms	Agentic Terms
Affectionate	Superb
Sympathetic	Excellent
Nurturing	Outstanding
Warm	Assertive
Thoughtful	Dominant
Delightful	Forceful
Compassionate	Exemplary
Friendly	Confident
Kind	Leader
Husband/wife/spouse	Strong
Children	Efficient
Empathetic	Problem-solver
Team player	Intelligent
Easy to work with	Solid
Well-liked	Bright
Communication skills	Excel
Conscientious	Exceptional
Honest	Rising star
Humble	Superior
Calm	Well-rounded
Congenial	Bright future

While no significant difference was revealed in using communal terms, male recommendation letters were much more likely to contain agentic words and refer to the applicant as a future leader and an outstanding personality.

Another group of scientists analyzed 332 letters of recommendation written for surgical residency applicants in 2016–2017 [12]. They also uncovered the existing significant bias towards male applicants, who received considerably longer references which spoke a lot about their achievements, abilities and leadership qualities. There was a higher amount of standout adjectives (such as exceptional). Meanwhile, women were more often described in general terms (e. g. delightful), and with reference to their physical appearance. In addition to that, doubt raisers were discovered in multiple female letters of recommendation.

A study of letters of recommendation for applicants to academic positions in 2009 [4] helped to reveal the gender bias and its influence on the recruitment decisions. The authors found that women were more likely to be described in communal terms (e. g., warm, kind) and in social-communal terms (e. g. mother). On the other hand, the letters of recommendation written for male candidates more often contained agentic terms (e. g. ambitious, self-confident). The second part

of the research showed that a negative correlation between the communal characteristics of the candidate and the hiring decision. This means, that the abundance of communal terms in women's letters of recommendation reduces their chances to be employed in academic positions.

*Gendered language in job applications.*

Should a woman behave in a more manly manner or can her advanced communal qualities help her in getting a job in traditionally masculine areas or higher management positions? A 2015 research called "Should Women Applicants "Man Up" for Traditionally Masculine Fields? Effectiveness of Two Verbal Identity Management Strategies" [3] tries to answer this question. The authors evaluated two strategies of the female candidates: emphasizing agentic traits or acknowledging their gender. The results show that female candidates using the first strategy were more likely to get a job than those who acknowledged their gender and stereotypes.

Kieran Snyder [18] analyzed the language in the resumes of 1 100 candidates for tech positions for roles in different areas and on different levels, 512 men and 588 women. She found that female resumes are longer, they contain 80 % more words on average. However, even though 61 % of male resumes fit in one page, they manage to provide more specific details about their previous jobs, and 91 % present it in a more readable bullet-list form (while only 36 % of women do the same). Women tend to include personal details and give more attention to their interests and hobbies.

The analysis of the job interview summaries of successful candidates for the similar level positions in the same company over the years and came to the conclusion that different characteristics are valued and expected of employees based on their gender [11]. For women, intelligence, business, and technical skills are less valued than for a man. Women are often described in general terms, as smart, sociable and committed. In the long run, this perception has a negative implication on women's compensation package and career advancement: male candidates are seen as keen and promising professionals and future leaders, while women are hired for their work ethics and ability to work hard and stay in the same position without too many expectations. This data is supported by the latest research on the candidates describing themselves during the application process by LinkedIn [5]. Women are more often than men describing themselves in general and ambiguous terms such as "likable," referring to their personal traits and ability to work in a team, while men are talking about their technical and business skills. In general, women tend to show-off their soft skills in their resumes, while men are emphasizing their hard skills.

*Gender-bias in performance reviews and professional evaluations.*

The expectations of a woman to behave in a more submissive and friendly manner clash with career advancement opportunities, especially within male-dominated areas and management positions. When we talk about the latter, the common perception of a leader is aligned with typically masculine qualities: speaking up and being assertive, telling others what to do, making decisions. On the other hand, there has been a recent shift towards the need for emotional intelligence in a leader which is connected to many feminine qualities such as being a good listener, supporting and rewarding your team members, and situationally adjusting your communication style. However, maintaining a balance between agentic and communal traits is a difficult task for a female leader. Those who tend to demonstrate communion, are perceived as weak, incompetent and indecisive, while those who behave in a more masculine manner are often characterized as bossy, unsupportive, and over-confident [19]. In the academic world, male professors more often receive positive evaluations while students have unrealistically high expectations of their female teachers. The latter

is expected to be warm and accessible and not too authoritative. However, if they demonstrate too much warmth they are deemed unprofessional. On the other hand, a male professor who is described accessible is evaluated much higher than his female counterpart. Male professors are more often characterized as “brilliant”, “intelligent”, “smart”, “cool”, “funny”, and “genius”, while women are more often described as “mean”, “hot”, “unfair”, “strict”, and even “annoying”.

An analysis of 248 performance reviews in American high-tech companies revealed that women are more likely to be criticized for their personality traits. Over 80 % of men received only constructive feedback, while this number was less than 30 % for women. Only women are described as bossy, abrasive, strident, aggressive, emotional and irrational [20].

A recent study analyzed peer evaluations of 4344 U.S. Naval Academy students who were asked to select from the list of leadership characteristics, some of them masculine, some feminine, and some neutral. The authors found that women received more negative characteristics and they were most typically feminine, for example, words like “unpredictable”, “indecisive”, “gossip with”, “passive”. Another study demonstrated that while females are generally associated with positive traits, such as happy and joyful, than men, they are evaluated negatively in the masculine professions and in managerial roles, especially by the opposite gender [16].

Gender has an influence on how the employee perceives the written communication coming from a manager [21]. The research shows, that an email with high usage of masculine language sent by a male manager is perceived as the most effective, while the feminine language in the man-written message is seen as the least effective. Interestingly, the language style of the female manager had little effect on their efficiency as a leader.

#### *Gendered-language in the public recommendations.*

For the current article, we collected the data from recommendations of male and female managers published on the public professional profiles on the LinkedIn.com website. LinkedIn is a platform that allows professionals to share resumes publicly in order to connect within their network and with potential employers. The users of the platform can also ask for recommendations and skill endorsements from peers and managers registered on the platform.

We randomly selected the profiles of 80 mid- and senior managers working in the area of education, informational technology, sales, and marketing and looked at their recommendations. The goals of the research were to check the following hypothesis:

1. Male and female candidates receive the same amount of recommendations on average. Previous research did not show a statistical difference in the number and length of the recommendations based on gender.

2. Male professionals are more often characterized in agentic terms than female professionals.

3. The usage of communal terms does not differ significantly for managers of different genders.

**Results and discussion.** Out of 80 profiles picked for the analysis, we discarded the ones that had no recommendations displayed and profiles with recommendations that were not relevant to the person’s managerial position or written in a language other than English. After this selection, we analyzed the language given to 26 male and 26 female managers.

Addressing the first research question we concluded that the average length of the resume received by a woman does not differ from the one received by a man. Concerning the number of received recommendations, we encountered more female profiles without any recommendations than males. However, for the profiles with recommendations, the number of recommendations didn’t significantly vary.

In terms of the gender of the recommenders, there was no dependence on whether men or women tend to write more recommendations for people of their own gender. On the other hand, we did notice that recommendations created by women tend to be about 1.5 times longer on average than the ones written by men.

We collected the words used to characterize men and women separately and categorized them using the list of terms presented in Hoffman’s research [11] we discussed before as a base. As predicted, we discovered that men are described in agentic terms far more frequently than men. For example, the word “leader” was used 76 times versus 39 times for women, often multiple times within one recommendation. This also goes for other words connected to leadership: “mentor” was used 16 times vs 5; “to drive” (e.g. in combination with words like “success”, “team”) was used 21 times vs 9, “to coach” was used 9 times vs 4; “strategic” – 14 times vs 7; “respected” – 10 times vs 6.

The words describing the manager as an achiever, for example, “deliver”, “achievement”, “success” were seen 3–4 times more often as characteristics for men. In addition to that, we noticed that the recommenders very frequently pointed out the uniqueness and superiority of the recommended male manager utilizing the words like “exceptional”, “great”, “outstanding”, and “unique”. These words were used less than 50 % less often in the female recommendations.

One of the most fascinating discoveries was that men are much more likely to be described as fun and easy-going. “Sense of humor” was attributed to a woman only once, while it was mentioned 10 times for male managers. Also, men are about 3 times more likely to be described as positive and fun. Even though the sense of humor may not be the agentic term per se, it may be connected to perceiving a person as a leader.

When it comes to communal characteristics such as “communication skills”, “teamwork”, “care”, and “calmness” we couldn’t see statistical differences across genders. This supports previous research discussed above and is also explained by the fact that these characteristics are required for a person to reach the management level.

We were also curious to see what are the most frequent words to describe female managers. While leadership was more often attributed to men, women are rather characterized as “great managers” who knows how to “help the team grow and develop”. Compared to men, women are twice as likely to be described as “hardworking”, “committed”, “motivated” and “performing”, about three times more likely to be called “dedicated” and “organized”. Women are also apparently perceived as more emotional. Words like “energetic” and “passionate” are more frequent in recommendations written to female managers (Table 2).

Table 2. The most frequent words used to characterize male and female managers in public recommendations

Category	Word	Female	Male
Agentic	Leader	39	76
	Strategic	7	14
	Mentor	5	16
	Vision	2	7
	Outstanding	4	9
	Exceptional	4	8
	Great	15	40
	Deliver	4	11
	Result	12	22

Category	Word	Female	Male
Agentic	Insights	4	9
	Drive	9	21
	Respected	6	10
	Exceed	1	7
	Guide	2	9
Communal	Nurture	3	4
	Friendly	6	6
	Communication	23	25
	Reliable	13	15
	Support	14	16
	Ethics	8	9
	Calm	3	2
Generic	Sense of humor	1	10
	Fun	2	5
	Positive	10	17
	Knowledge	23	30
	Motivated	7	3
	Committed	12	7
	Energetic	13	8
	Passionate	14	10
	Organized	15	6
	Hardworking	15	7

We can conclude, that our analysis showed a significant difference between recommendations displayed on male and female profiles. Even for professionals who have reached comparable career level, leadership attributes are less likely to be attributed to women than to men. Communal characteristics inherent for an emphatic manager are present equally in both male and female recommendations. Women also receive fewer recommendations in general.

*Limitations and opportunities for further research.*

While job recommendations is not a new area of research, public recommendations and job profiles are still a new topic in this area. For the present article, we only looked at a small sample of profiles and only at the ones written in English.

For future research, it would be interesting to segment the recommendations based on whether they were written by a manager, a peer, or a subordinate of the recommended professional. It will also be relevant to look at the correlation between the gender of the person who wrote the recommendation and the usage of agentic and communal words to describe a male or a female manager. In addition to that, while all the analyzed recommendations were written in English, we did not take into account the national origin and the cultural background of both the recommender and whether English as their native language.

**Conclusion.** While inclusion in a buzzword in organizations of today, the prejudices against men as a care-providers and women as top-managers persist. The words chosen to describe a professional in their curriculum vitae, cover letters, interviews, references, and performance reviews plays an important part in determining people’s careers. Furthermore, organizations should be aware that the job description can contain hidden gender-bias that may discourage women from applying and will negatively reflect on the diversity in the workspace.

When it comes to public profiles and of the job candidates on LinkedIn, hiring managers to see a combination of self-evaluation and recommendations, which can include hidden gender-bias.

As we have seen in the previous and our own research, women are less likely to be seen as leaders and more likely as hard-working performers. This conclusion may help us understand why the gender gap is so big, especially in the managerial and executive roles.

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#### **Information about the author.**

**Oksana O. Stroi** – Master (2019), Walden University, Minneapolis, USA, 100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 900, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401. Areas of expertise: applied linguistics, gender studies, social studies. E-mail: [oxana.stroi@gmail.com](mailto:oxana.stroi@gmail.com)

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### **Информация об авторе.**

**Строй Оксана Олеговна** – магистр (2019), Уолденский университет, Миннеаполис, США, 100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 900, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401. Сфера научных интересов: прикладная лингвистика, гендерные исследования, обществознание. E-mail: [oxana.stroi@gmail.com](mailto:oxana.stroi@gmail.com)