

# Nonsexist dictionary rules out manholes and snowmen

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"Manhole" is out. Use "sewer access hole" or "sewer opening." "Abominable snowman" is frowned upon. Please refer to "abominable snowman creature." "Gentleman farmer" may be used if really necessary for historical accuracy. But "gentleman" ought to be in quotation marks "to signal that the term as used might be offensive not only to women but to those farmers who by exclusion are considered 'ungentlemanly.'" "These politically correct recommendations are to be found in *The A-Z of Non-sexist Language*, the first reference book of its kind to be published in Britain. Its author, Margaret Doyle, is an American with a degree in women's studies. She is a freelance writer and copy editor in London. Doyle said her goal was not to obliterate words or usages," but rather to offer alternatives and she was conscious that some of her alternatives would have a wider appeal than others. "Mostly, people will change their language not by being told to, but they accepting natural alternatives," she said. The book, published by The Women's Press, is the latest contribution to the debate about "political correctness" although, as Doyle points out, that term is now little more than "a useful [though wildly misapplied] label for ridiculing an opposing viewpoint. "A more serious accusation is that the attempt to remove sexism from language may be worthy, because language helps form perceptions, but could lead to a colorless, artificial form of communication that no one takes seriously. Take "daddy-longlegs," an evocative word for flying insect with long spindly legs. Is this a sexist word that should be dropped in favor of crane-fly, as dictionary suggests? Should chess pieces be renamed to avoid offense? The dictionary lists optional alternatives such as

"sovereign" for king, with the queen becoming "deputy sovereign." Even Doyle appears skeptical here." Some people advocate replacing sex-specific names of chess pieces, especially as the power they wield reflects a sexist hierarchy, with the king at the top, although the queen has more freedom of movement," she writes. The book argues that the use of language, intentionally or not, can be exclusive and English has an underlying presumption of a norm that is "white, male, heterosexual, middle class." "Businessman, chairman and most other words ending in man are given as blatant examples of sexist use.

Less obvious, but just as exclusive, are words such as receptionist and secretary, etymologically neutral but so completely identified with women that the adjective "male" is normally placed before them if the job is filled by a man. That would not matter too much, except the identification of a job as "women's work" often goes hand-in-hand with low pay and a tendency to demean the skills involved. Doyle says that the struggle for control over language is a political contest. "Consider, for example, the Conservative government's appropriation of the language of the liberal left, where 'care in the community' and 'empowerment' now mean cuts in welfare and service provision," she writes. Even for the most aware, language can be a minefield. Take labels regarded as offensive, only to be taken up by militants and used with pride- "dyke," for example. "Like 'bitch,' this term is being reclaimed by some lesbians as a positive label, though it is still used as an insult to refer to 'unfeminine' lesbians by others," reads the reference under this heading. "Use carefully." ▲

