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In the States

Six State Constitutions Use Gender-Neutral Wording

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Six states adopted gender-neutral language in their constitutions; eight others are considering the change. Advocates say gender-neutral language is a subtle but important way to promote equality; critics call it empty, feel-good, demeaning to women.

ALBANY, N.Y. (WOMENSENEWS)--A recent New York state referendum that will change the state constitution wording to gender-neutral language is part of a growing awareness of the power of language and the role it plays in promoting equality.



Sandy Galef

Advocates of gender-neutral language say that it is a subtle and often overlooked aspect of equality, but so pervasive that it affects everyday thinking in the workplace, home and government. Critics say the push for gender-neutral language is an unnecessary and even frivolous effort that distracts attention and drains resources from more pressing issues.

Still, a heightened awareness of gender-neutral language is evident in universities, institutional training programs and everyday conversation.

"I can't think of a more important time for this issue than right now," said Judith Barlow, a professor of English and acting chair of the women's studies department at the State University of New York in Albany. "There are going to be great changes in Afghanistan, that for several years has barely acknowledged women." Using language that erases women by only mentioning men absolutely sends the wrong message, she added.

The change in the New York State Constitution takes place immediately and will appear as soon as new copies are printed, an annual process. In most cases, the words "he" and "him" will be replaced with "he or she" and "him or her," but other changes will also be made. All references to the governor as "he" will become "the governor" and references to a "fireman" in a section dealing with civil service employees will become "firefighter."

That change reflects the decades-long efforts by women's scholars and others to change usage from gender-specific terms to gender-neutral terms, or terms that don't denote marital status. Examples from the 1970s and 1980s include police officer instead of policeman; chair instead of chairman; flight attendant instead of stewardess; and Ms. as an alternative to Mrs. or Miss. Advocates say that other, more recent terms, such as "humankind" instead of "mankind" are gradually gaining acceptance into modern terminology.

Six States Have Changed Wording: Eight Considering Changes

New York follows the example of several other states that have either changed their state constitutions to gender-neutral language or are considering doing so. Some states are also considering applying gender-neutral requirements to the wording of new legislation and the revision of current law.

Or, in Rhode Island's case, returning to old language. A research project undertaken by the state's Commission on Women recently brought to light the 1663 charter to the Rhode Island colony granted by King Charles II of England. The document is noteworthy for using many gender-neutral phrases instead of the male-oriented phrases that would be expected, said Jane Anthony, chair of the commission. The most prominent example cited by Anthony: a phrase that states "no person within the said colony, at any time hereafter shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question."

"It seems somewhat ironic," Anthony said, "that you find your first official document had nonspecific language, which was quite unusual at that time, and then centuries later, you had people making a conscious choice not to use nonspecific gender language."

New York voters approved the change in the language of the state constitution in last month's general election. The campaign for the referendum unfolded with little public debate, and 56 percent of the voters approved the measure.

The change in New York started four years ago with a bill introduced by state Assembly member Sandy Galef, a Democrat from the town of Ossining, about an hour's drive north of New York City.

N.Y. Lawmaker: Language Change Shows Others Women Are Valued

"You could say it's symbolic, but I think words are very important," Galef said. "What we say, how we say it, sends a message. We changed the term 'stewardess' to 'flight attendant' and that changed the image. I think symbolically it's important for us to show other countries that we value women."

The bill eventually gained bipartisan support, unanimously passing both the Republican-controlled state Senate and the Democratic-controlled Assembly. With legislative support secured, the change was ready for the referendum. Since the constitution is reprinted annually and distributed by the Secretary of State's office, there will be no significant or special cost to taxpayers, Galef said.

She touched on Barlow's theme of international perceptions in describing why she pushed for gender-neutral language in the state constitution, which dates to 1777 and had 170 references to the male gender and no references to the female gender. Her staff's research revealed that six other states--California, Hawaii, Maine, Rhode Island, Vermont and Florida--have changed their constitutions to gender-neutral language, and eight are considering such a change: Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, Nebraska, New Hampshire and Wyoming.

The Conservative Party of New York was one of the most vocal opponents of the referendum, issuing a written statement of opposition and speaking out through its leadership against the effort, specifically in New York and in society in general.

"We were opposed to it before Sept. 11, but Sept. 11 highlighted that with all the things that have to be done in the state of New York, here the legislature spent time on something that did absolutely nothing for anyone," said Michael Long, the Conservative Party state chair. "It's just another example of what I guess one could consider 'feel good' legislation. Male and female legislators could not pass a budget on time, yet they could this. Shame on them."

Conservatives: Women Losers When Language Obscures Femininity

Long said women will lose more than they gain by pressing for language that obscures their femininity, in a world where women are often treated poorly.

"I do believe women sometimes have to be treated a little special," he said. "They haven't always been treated correctly, but I hope they would always be treated special."

Those working to change the thinking about male-dominant language agree that it can be difficult for people of either gender to push for such changes.

Sherryl Kleinman, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, has gained recognition for her campaign to eliminate the expression "you guys" from spoken language when the phrase describes a mixed-gender group. She knows she has an uphill battle when she hears a student in her gender class tell the group of 35 women and five men, "You guys, I have an announcement."

A year ago, Kleinman published a commentary entitled, "Good-bye 'You Guys'" in *New York Newsday*. In it, she mused about the origin of the expression and suggested that it came into common usage about the same time feminists started pushing for changes in official language.

In Popular Speech, 'You Guys' Refers to Both Women and Men

"So when did you 'you guys' sneak by and then sneak in?" Kleinman wrote. "I suspect it entered the scene around the time that official titles like 'chairman' were being challenged. You can push the provost to change freshman to first-year student or complain to publishers about their use of congressman in text books. But you can't go to court to make your friends stop using 'you guys.'"



Sherryl Kleinman

Kleinman and two former students have designed a card that publicizes the effort to eliminate "you guys" from spoken language, which can be handed out to explain the campaign "in a way that doesn't scold people," she wrote in her *Newsday* article.

The wallet-sized card has an illustration in the form of a mathematical equation, showing three women being added with one man and forming "you guys." The text sets up the illustration, reading in part, "Imagine someone walking up to a group of guys and saying, 'Hey, girls, how're ya doing?' We doubt they'd be amused! So isn't it weird that women are supposed to accept--even like--being called 'one of the guys?'"

Kleinman said the struggle for women to assert gender-neutral language can be likened to the efforts of African Americans to reject "Negro" and claim "black" in the 1960s, or the acceptance of "gay" in print and broadcast media instead of "homosexual."

"The struggle is harder when it comes to sexist language because, unlike blacks, for example, in relation to whites, most women seek intimate relationships with men, for emotional and economic reasons," Kleinman said. "This intimacy can be threatened when women make issues out of language habits that so many people take for granted."

Women, Men Pressured Not to Raise Issue of Gender-Neutral Language

Women's studies professor Barlow recalled a recent faculty meeting about the search for a new dean of the college of arts and sciences. A male department chair made repeated use of male gender terms, saying of the as-yet-

unidentified candidate for the dean's post that "he should know how to do this," and "he should have this experience."

"It was very glaring; it was certainly noted by people around me," Barlow recalled. But no one spoke up, she added.

"I think men and women have different reasons for being silent in this situation," said Jackson Katz, a nationally known expert on the prevention of gender-based violence, who has lectured and conducted training sessions at universities and military bases domestically and abroad.

For many women, Katz said, "they don't want to be creating conflict; they want to be creating cohesion. I think a lot of women just shuffle papers uneasily but go on. But the silence comes at a cost. The cost is frustration and loss of self-respect."



Jackson Katz

For men who want to speak up but are reluctant to do so, "there are very few models of men doing that kind of thing in public, much less private," Katz said. "You're not a team player--'What are you, one of those sensitive New Age guys?'"

Katz sees a dangerous flip side to gender-specific language, when sexual violence or teen pregnancy are almost always described in terms of the female gender. Rape statistics are usually presented in terms of how many thousands of women a year are raped, but rarely in terms of how many thousands of men a year commit rape. Teen pregnancies are couched in terms of how many teens become pregnant each year, but rarely in terms of how many boys or men a year impregnate teen-agers.

Advocates of gender-neutral language say they have a long way to go before gaining full acceptance in the culture of the United States, but many are persisting in their efforts to educate people.

Matt Ezzell is the coordinator of community education at the Orange County Rape Crisis Center in Chapel Hill, N.C. He stresses the use of gender-neutral language in training sessions.

"The first time we say something about it in our training group, they're surprised, they don't want to discuss it," Ezzell said. He persists, because he went through a similar awakening a few years ago and knows that most people will be receptive to the change once they think about it.

"It was like a lightbulb," said Ezzell, who majored in women's studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, describing the time in college that he first heard someone else talk about language that constantly refers to the dominant male gender. "And it took me about a year to purge it from my language, that's how pervasive it was."

Darryl McGrath is a journalist in Albany, N.Y., who writes often on politics and child welfare issues.

For more information:

You All:

<http://www.youall.freesevers.com/home.html>

Jackson Katz:

<http://www.jacksonkatz.com/>

"Gender Neutrality in the New York State Constitution," by New York state Assemblywoman Sandra Galef:

http://assembly.state.ny.us/member_files/090/20010730/index.htm
<http://assembly.state.ny.us/mem/?ad=090>

Rhode Island Royal Charter:

<http://www.sec.state.ri.us/rihist/richart.htm>

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