Conscious and Unconscious Gender Bias

Response to DACOWITS RFI 4

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Introduction

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) requested a literature review on conscious and unconscious gender bias. Of particular interest to the Committee was (1) the academic definitions of conscious and unconscious gender bias; (2) relevant media coverage of conscious and unconscious gender bias in the U.S. military; and (3) gender-inclusive wording adaptations in the U.S. military, foreign militaries, and U.S. commercial workplaces.

Chapter 1 reviews the academic foundations of bias, including conscious and unconscious gender bias. It also features relevant recent research on conscious and unconscious gender bias. Chapter 2 reviews recent (since 2016) media coverage on gender bias within the U.S. military. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of how gender-inclusive wording has been adapted within the U.S. military, foreign militaries, and U.S. commercial workplaces and civilian industries. Chapter 4 concludes this discussion by identifying best practices and strategies to address conscious and unconscious gender bias through gender-inclusive wording and policies.
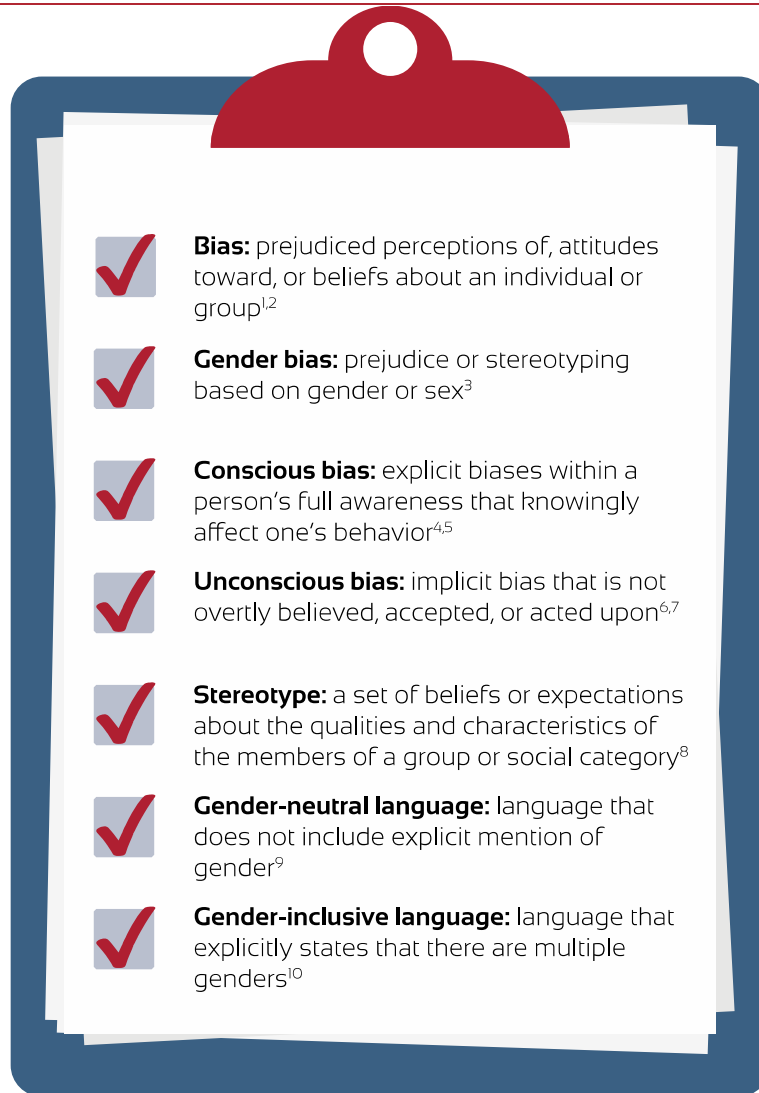
Chapter 1. Definitions of Bias

This chapter provides an overview of gender bias, including definitions and examples of positive, negative, conscious, and unconscious gender bias (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Definitions of Bias, Gender Bias, Conscious Bias, Unconscious Bias, Stereotypes, Gender-neutral language, and Gender-inclusive language

✓ **Bias:** prejudiced perceptions of, attitudes toward, or beliefs about an individual or group[1,2]

✓ **Gender bias:** prejudice or stereotyping based on gender or sex[3]

✓ **Conscious bias:** explicit biases within a person's full awareness that knowingly affect one's behavior[4,5]

✓ **Unconscious bias:** implicit bias that is not overtly believed, accepted, or acted upon[6,7]

✓ **Stereotype:** a set of beliefs or expectations about the qualities and characteristics of the members of a group or social category[8]

✓ **Gender-neutral language:** language that does not include explicit mention of gender[9]

✓ **Gender-inclusive language:** language that explicitly states that there are multiple genders[10]

A. Defining Bias and Gender Bias

In general, biases can manifest as prejudiced perceptions of, attitudes toward, or beliefs about an individual or group, and these biases have the power to affect behavior.[11,12] Gender bias, or sexism, involves any prejudice or stereotyping based on gender or sex.[13] It is important to note that although all genders—including women, men, nonbinary[i] individuals, and transgender people—can be targets of gender bias,[14,15,16] research and a history of gender-based discriminatory policies often highlight prejudice against women.[17] Although Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits gender-based discrimination in the American workplace,[18] women continue to experience gender bias in and out of the office.[19]

Bias, and gender bias more specifically, can take both positive and negative forms. Positive gender bias is often referred to as benevolent sexism, and although it is well intended, any form of gender bias can have adverse effects.[20] An example of positive gender bias is the belief that women are better caretakers and cooks than men, which can subsequently lead to the idea that women are better suited for domestic work rather than a professional career. This kind of gender bias can fuel both acts of overt discrimination and implicit bias that hinders women's social and professional equality in society. On the other hand, negative gender bias—or hostile sexism—is founded on the belief that women are less competent than men.[21] For example, someone who believes men are better leaders compared with women may promote a man rather than a superiorly qualified woman.[22,23] Although different beliefs drive positive and negative gender biases, both have the potential to be either consciously or unconsciously held, and detrimental in nature. Researchers have also shown that benevolent and hostile sexism are not mutually exclusive forms of sexism. They often coexist and reinforce one another to strengthen the continued existence of gender biases[24]

B. Defining Conscious and Unconscious Bias

Conscious biases exist within a person's full awareness, thus knowingly affecting one's behavior.[25,26] Building off of the previous example, a person's decision to promote a man rather than a woman would be a form of conscious gender bias if the person explicitly believed and stated women make lesser leaders. Meanwhile, unconscious or implicit gender bias is that which is not overtly believed, accepted, or acted upon.[27,28] Whereas people are fully aware of their conscious biases, unconscious biases can influence perception and behavior without the person recognizing their existence. Moreover, a person can consciously and outwardly express one belief while unconsciously possessing a directly contradictory belief.[29,30] In this way, the same scenario could have a similar outcome, but the origin of the promotion decision could result from unconscious bias; the person could consciously believe women and men can be equally effective leaders but unconsciously believe men are better leaders. This unconscious bias could have unknowingly affected the person's decision not to promote the superiorly qualified woman. Although one could argue whether conscious or unconscious bias is worse, either type could be equally responsible for the prejudiced behavior outlined in this example, and both can have damaging effects. For this reason, researchers have been studying the causes, effects, and reduction strategies of both conscious and unconscious forms of gender bias.[31,32,33]

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[i] Nonbinary individuals do not identify as either a man/male or woman/female.

C. Conscious and Unconscious Gender Bias in the Workplace

1.   Conscious Bias: Removing Barriers to Participation

Updated policies and shifts in societal norms have proved to be effective combatants against many widespread prejudiced behaviors and discrimination against women. Throughout history, conscious bias against women as competent, valued professionals has limited women's participation and advancement in the professional workplace. Although the U.S military began to allow women to join the Services as permanent members in 1948, they were still barred from the Military Service Academies (MSAs) until 1976.[34] Despite equal treatment in some areas of the military, women's access to these elite training institutions continued to be restricted, ultimately barring one pathway for them to become officers and advance as senior military leaders. Since 1980, when the MSAs graduated the first classes that included women, the percentage of women in the academies has increased steadily; the most recent freshman classes were 25 percent female.[35] Women have also made inroads into the historically male-dominated fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). A recent report by the Pew Research Center showed an increase in the percentage of women in multiple STEM areas from 1990 to 2016, which included a 13-percent increase in life sciences and a 17-percent increase in the physical sciences.[36] This growth of women in STEM fields, during a time period in which women's overall participation in the labor force leveled off, is likely the result of new policies and initiatives aimed at removing barriers to entry for girls and women interesting in STEM careers.[37,38,39] For example, Google's Women Techmakers initiative aims to empower women in the male-dominated technology industry by providing support and resources, offering career development opportunities, and creating a community of women with shared backgrounds and interests. Although many barriers representing conscious, explicit bias against women in the workplace have been removed, unconscious bias continues to affect women's opportunities and advancement in professional settings.

2.   Unconscious Bias: Remnants of Gender Stereotypes in the Workplace

Research reveals that unconscious gender bias permeates society and continues to perpetuate gender inequality even when equality has been legally established.[40,41,42,43,44] Many unconscious biases are rooted in gender stereotypes that reflect traditional gender roles and norms, such as that of women as housewives and caretakers or men as career-driven breadwinners.[45] Even though these traditional gender roles are no longer standard in society, research has found that most people continue to have implicit biases toward these stereotypes.[46] For example, a 2010 study on gender bias found that both male and female law students implicitly associated men with career roles and women with the role of a homemaker.[47] The researchers concluded these implicit biases could be partially responsible for the lack of women in legal professions, particularly in positions of power. An implicit belief in gender stereotypes can also lead to biased assessments of individuals, especially when those individuals do not adhere to the roles or behaviors associated with their gender's stereotype. In a 2018 study analyzing more than 80,000 military performance reviews, researchers found no gender-based differences in the objective numeric-based review scores. They did, however, find subjective reviews were more likely to assign descriptors such as "compassionate" or "inept" to women and "analytical" or "arrogant" for men (see Table 1). Moreover, they found that whereas the same number of positive attributes were assigned to each of the genders, far more negative attributes were assigned to women.[48] The persistence of gendered stereotypes shown through these military evaluations, particularly stereotypes with negative and/or less valued traits, makes it more difficult for women to be taken seriously as leaders. Although the historical and cultural barriers against gender equality continue to erode, research demonstrates that unconscious, implicit forms of gender bias continue to shape society in profound ways.

Table 1. Attributes Assigned to Male and Female Service Members in Performance Reviews in Order of Relative Frequency[49]

Words Used to Describe Men		Words Used to Describe Women	
Positive Attributes	**Negative Attributes**	**Positive Attributes**	**Negative Attributes**
■ Analytical ■ Competent ■ Athletic ■ Dependable ■ Confident ■ Versatile ■ Articulate ■ Level-headed ■ Logical ■ Practical	■ Arrogant ■ Irresponsible	■ Compassionate ■ Enthusiastic ■ Energetic ■ Organized	■ Inept ■ Selfish ■ Frivolous ■ Passive ■ Scattered ■ Opportunistic ■ Gossip ■ Excitable ■ Vain ■ Panicky ■ Temperamental ■ Indecisive

Source: Smith, Rosenstein, & Nikolov, 2018[50]

D. Definitions of Gender-Neutral and Gender-Inclusive Wording

The use of gender-neutral language is achieved by avoiding spotlighting, diminutivisation, and gender-specific pronouns and terms.[51] Spotlighting occurs when authors unnecessarily gender behavior (i.e., "male nurse" or "female CEO").[52] In comparison, diminutivisation results from lowering the status of a position by adding a suffix—for example, using "actress" or "waitress" rather than the gender-neutral terms "actor" or "waiter."[53] By recasting sentences to remove gender-specific pronouns, authors can craft gender-neutral language. Recasting includes using a plural rather than singular noun (e.g., "A stellar teacher will treat her students with respect," becomes "Stellar teachers treat their students with respect."); repeating the noun instead of using a pronoun; or replacing the pronoun with a definite or indefinite article (e.g., "The teacher and her students" becomes "The teacher and a/the student(s)").[54] Gender-specific terms include words such as "man" or titles that end in "men" to refer to both women and men. Recasting "chairman," "policeman," and "fireman" as "chair," "police officer," and "firefighter" creates gender-neutral versions.[55] In comparison, gender-inclusive language includes references to "all genders" and provides options other than "male" and "female."[56]

Chapter 2. Recent Media Coverage of Gender Bias

This chapter provides a review of recent news media coverage (from 2016 through 2018) on the U.S. military and issues of conscious and unconscious bias within the military institution. Most of the coverage has shown how the military and veterans organizations are working to address conscious and unconscious gender bias through policy and language changes.

A. Recent News Articles

Several such examples of recent news stories follow:

Navy and Gender-Neutral Job Titles. In 2016, the media reported on the Navy's intent to transition all its job titles and descriptions into gender-neutral terms. This would involve replacing "man" in job titles such as "rifleman," "mineman," and "assault man" with terms such as "technician," "specialist," and "professional."[57] However, this approach could not be used to adjust some terms, such as "yeoman."[58] Moreover, the Navy reported that the term "midshipman" would continue to be used at the U.S. Naval Academy because it was a rank, not a job title.[59]

Marine Corps Requires Gender Integration Training, Including Discussions of Unconscious Bias. In 2016, the media reported the Marine Corps would conduct a 2-day mandatory training as part of the Service's integration of women into ground combat units. Both active duty and Reserve members were required to complete the training, which covered the new gender-neutral physical standards, the Marine Corps' gender integration plans, scenario vignettes, and a discussion about unconscious bias.[60,61]

Army Moves Towards Gender and Age Neutral Physical Fitness Standards. In 2018, the Army approved a new Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) that is intended to replace the current physical fitness test in October 2020. The ACFT is designed to better assess Soldiers' ability to perform during combat and assess a wider variety of physical fitness measures; it will increase the number of evaluation measures from 2 to 10. The test is age and gender neutral, measuring every Soldier against the same standard.[62]

C. Recent Op-Eds

Op-eds and other types of opinion-based media coverage raise challenges and continued questions about gender bias in the structure and culture of the U.S. military; most of these pieces are authored by women in the military or women veterans. Descriptions of some recent op-eds follow:

Kate Germano, author of "Fight Like a Girl." In recent months, retired Marine Kate Germano has gained media attention for her book "Fight Like a Girl" (released in 2018), which described her experiences leading the Fourth Recruit Training Battalion at Parris Island.[63] In her book, and subsequent op-eds, she argued that the Marine Corps has systematic gender bias that discourages success for female Marines and begins with lower expectations and separation from their male peers in boot camp.[64]

Being a Woman in the Military and the Transition to Being a Veteran. In a series of veterans' essays published in The Atlantic, Air Force veteran Sarah Maples has described how her experiences trying to "fit in" as a woman in the military have continued as she navigates her life as a veteran. She explained how the structural and cultural landscape of the military requires women to assimilate to nontraditional gender roles that clash with civilian societal expectations of being a woman. Moreover, she said, women are rarely recognized by the general public or others as veterans—a form of unconscious gender bias that has resulted from the historical association of men and military service.[65]

Chapter 3. Examples of Gender-Inclusive Wording

This chapter's main focus is on the use of gender-neutral language in multiple contexts such as U.S. and foreign militaries, corporations, and universities. This chapter also highlights research supporting the use of gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language to help create inclusive environments.

A. Gender-Inclusive Wording in U.S. and Foreign Militaries

The military has historically been a male-dominated institution, not only in the United States but also abroad. There have been significant improvements to military policy and culture during the past several decades to better support servicewomen and create a more inclusive environment.[66,67] However, even after legal barriers to women's service have fallen, the persistent use of gendered language continues to undermine gender equality in the military. Research shows the use of gendered language can encourage or discourage individuals from pursuing or remaining in a particular role.[68] Furthermore, gendered language can contribute to inequality among men and women by insinuating that one gender is somehow less valuable than another.[69] As part of creating an environment that welcomes and supports women, the Services are recognizing that all position titles and descriptions should reflect gender equality by utilizing gender-neutral terminology.

1. Gender-Neutral Terms in the U.S. Military

After the implementation of gender integration in January 2016, the Marine Corps and the Navy were the only Services to announce decisions to modify their respective position titles to reflect gender neutrality.[70,71] The Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard have not yet announced plans to follow suit, although the Coast Guard has reportedly been evaluating the need for these updates.[72] Regarding gendered terms of interest, those such as "yeoman," "rifleman," and "damage controlman" reflect the historical male dominance of these positions and the military institution in general. These gendered terms are outdated, especially in the absence of any male-only occupations. As noted previously, the use of gendered language can negatively affect one's propensity to pursue a particular career or can even suggest a particular gender is less valued.[73,74] As such, the Navy and Marine Corps' goal was to update these gendered terms to represent all Service members who currently hold or will hold these titles. Doing so has the potential to positively affect current servicewomen's perceptions of their roles as well as to present a welcoming front for more women to join any occupation.[75]

This process of transitioning to gender-neutral job titles has not been without its challenges, however. During the early stages, former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter noted the particular difficulty in replacing the word "unmanned" in many job titles, such as "unmanned vehicle operator." Replacing this word with one that did not start with a "u" would require a change in multiple longstanding program acronyms.[76] Furthermore, the Navy quickly identified a challenge with the "yeoman" title, as simply removing the "-man" portion of the word would leave the meaningless "yeo."[77] One suggestion for a new title to replace "yeoman" was "administrative specialist," which would adhere to former Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus' additional desire for new titles to be not only gender neutral but also more easily understood by civilians.[78,79] A later suggestion within the Navy included referring to Sailors by rank rather than traditional title, a proposed change which was later struck down a result of overwhelming negative feedback from Sailors on the matter.[80] By December 2016, the Navy withdrew its initial plans to create gender-neutral position titles.[81,82]

The Marine Corps, however, followed through on its plans and removed the word "man" from 19 of its job titles by mid-2016 (see Table 2).[83,84] Recently, the Service decided to also remove unnecessarily gendered pronouns and wording from all Marine Corps documents and publications within 2 years.[85] For example, any documents that refer to a commander as a male (e.g., by "he" or "him") will be edited to be gender neutral. The Marine Corps has also implemented training courses on unconscious bias at boot camp and in schools and leadership courses.[86] In an additional attempt to remove unnecessarily gendered designations, the Service recently adopted DACOWITS' recent recommendation to cease using the term "PREG" on the fitness reports of pregnant Marines. The term has been replaced with "EXMP," meaning "exempt."[87] These changes reflect the Service's desire to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for people of all genders. At the time of this writing, the Marine Corps was the only Service that had modified its position titles to be gender neutral.

Table 2. Examples of Marine Corps Occupational Titles Updated in 2016 to Be Gender Neutral

Original Job Title		Updated Gender-Neutral Job Title
Basic Infantryman	→	Basic Infantry Marine
Antitank Missileman	→	Antitank Missile Gunner
Recon Man Parachute and Combat DIV	→	Recon Marine Parachute and Combat DIV
Fire Support Man	→	Fire Support Marine
Field Artillery Operations Man	→	Field Artillery Operations Chief

Source: Gibbons-Neff, 2016[88]

2.   Gender-Neutral Terms in Foreign Militaries

Although multiple foreign militaries allow women to serve, and some are fully integrated by gender, an extensive search did not reveal any readily available reports of any foreign militaries that have updated their terminology to be gender neutral.[89] One possible explanation is that the primary language of many countries is itself gendered. For example, in the Israel Defense Forces, because of the gendered nature of the Hebrew language, the term used to refer to a person's rank or position depends on whether the person is male or female.[90] Hebrew has two words to indicate the rank of major general, "aluf" being the male term and "alufa" being the female term. However, when retired Major General Orna Barbivai was promoted to her position as the highest-ranking female in the Israeli military, she was referred to by the male term ("aluf") because this had been the only word ever used for this particular rank. It is not clear if this approach will become standard practice; there is no standing policy in the Israeli military regarding gender-neutral or gender-specific ranks or titles.[91]

3.   Outcomes and Effects of Gender-Neutral Language in the Military Context

Although the efforts of the Marine Corps to create gender-neutral titles align with best practices from academic research,[92] the outcomes of this specific implementation have yet to be studied given how new this change is. Furthermore, with full gender integration beginning less than 3 years ago, the implications of a multitude of policy updates and changes remain to be assessed. However, by allowing women into all military positions and modifying outdated gendered language, the Services are more likely to reflect and support the diverse population of current and potential Service members. The examples discussed from U.S. and foreign militaries show how deeply embedded gendered language is

within society, language of origin, and military institutions, demonstrating how this shift will require intentional and dedicated attention for change.

B. Gender-Inclusive Wording in U.S. Commercial Workplaces

Gender-specific and exclusionary language in the U.S. commercial workplace marginalizes female employees as well as nonbinary individuals—those who do not identify as male or female—potentially isolating them and rendering them invisible. These groups benefit from gender-neutral and inclusive language. Although not the focus of this review, the transgender community has also benefited from gender-inclusive wording in the U.S. commercial workplace. This section provides examples of U.S. companies that have adopted gender-neutral and inclusive language through style guides and communication, user-focused platforms, recruitment and hiring efforts, and policy changes to build and maintain a respectful workplace for all employees.

1. Style Guides and Communication Protocols

Style guides and publication guidelines tend to follow rather than lead language trends; therefore, a historical analysis of their adoption of gender-inclusive language is helpful because they encapsulate language changes already embraced by mainstream society. In the early 1970s, the American Psychological Association issued a publication manual in which it cautioned authors to "be aware of the current move to avoid generic use of male nouns and pronouns when content refers to both sexes."[93] Not long after, commercial book publishers and academic journals followed suit. Book publishers Prentice-Hall,[94] McGraw-Hill Book Company,[95] and Random House,[96] as well as academic organizations and journals that included the National Council of Teachers of English,[97] the American Speech-Language-Hearing,[98] the Modern Language Association,[99] and the Linguistic Society of America,[100] published policies between 1972 and 1996 discouraging the use of gendered language. Instead, they advocated for gender-neutral terms and inclusive language to promote gender equality by consciously avoiding the perpetuation of stereotypes. These policies were incredibly effective because authors were required to follow them if they were to be published.

Such policies have also made their way into the administration of U.S. universities and colleges. Language changes have been driven by students and faculty after years of discrimination and frustration. Language guidelines implemented in 1990 at Emory & Henry College in Virginia, which state that the college expects all communication by students, faculty, and staff to include inclusive language, resulted from the circulation of a petition inspired by a column published in the college newspaper.[101] An investigation into the prevalence of sexist and unnecessarily gendered language on the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire campus that began after a female faculty member was listed as "chairman" on a department website led to the implementation of the current inclusive language policy.[102] In the past two decades, many other colleges and universities have updated their language policies. Boston University encourages language that eschews prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination, including incorporating gender-inclusive titles, like "firefighter" instead of "fireman."[103] Similar to Boston University, Emerson College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology each ask the members of their respective communities to avoid gendered language, and they provide example sentences demonstrating appropriate ways to "write around" pronouns.[104,105] Just last year, University of Virginia's Judiciary Committee voted to update the university constitution to include gender-inclusive language. The 2017 amendment, for which more than 80 percent of the committee members voted, replaced male pronouns and gendered titles with more inclusive versions.[106]

The inclusion of gender-neutral language policies is also being implemented in corporate offices such as those of Microsoft and Google. Microsoft's guide on bias-free communication mandates using gender-neutral or inclusive terms such as "chair" instead of "chairman" and avoiding masculine pronouns when the gender of the person is unknown. Moreover, Microsoft warns the computer technology community to be cautious of stereotyping when using male or female names and pronouns to describe job roles.[107] In fact, Microsoft has extended this style guide to its Microsoft Word product. Users of Word can select the Inclusive Language option to cause the program to automatically detect and underline gendered language the same way it does spelling and grammar errors.[108] Google's "Developer Documentation Style Guide" includes guidance on gender-neutral pronouns and is intended for use by those who develop products for Google. The guide stipulates that accurate, gender-specific pronouns should be used only when the gender is known; when the gender is not known, the guide argues for a singular "they," citing classics author Jane Austin's work to prove that historically, this was acceptable.[109]

2. User-Focused Platforms

Companies that provide services to users have adapted these services to include gender-neutral and inclusive language. In 2015, Facebook added a custom free-response blank option to its list of 58 gender-identity options from which users could select.[110] A user can also change the pronoun featured on the user's profile. Organizations such as Whitman Walker Health, a community health center in the District of Columbia, show they acknowledge and respect a patient's gender identity by using forms that ask for both gender identity and correct pronoun[111] and by including the correct pronouns for staff on their websites.[112] Although the clear majority of virtual assistants—e.g., Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, Microsoft's Cortana—are assigned a female gender and/or use a female voice, Capital One has launched a gender-neutral virtual assistant named Eno. Eno can help users pay their credit card bills or see their account balances. Unlike the other virtual assistants, when asked for its gender, Eno responds, "Binary."[113] Efforts to adapt the language used in these services demonstrate that excluding and marginalizing large groups of potential users is no longer a viable strategy for successful, mainstream companies.

3. Recruitment and Hiring Efforts

In the 1970s, women made up less than 5 percent of musicians in the top five professional orchestras in the United States. After implementing blind auditions, during which auditioning musicians stand behind a screen out of sight from the selection panel, the percentage of women filling these seats rose quickly. Today, more than 50 percent of the musicians in the top 250 orchestras in the United States are women.[114] Inspired by this effort to combat implicit bias, some companies have started working with GapJumpers, a software company that removes personal information such as name and gender from job candidates' applications. An analysis of 6,000 companies that have used GapJumpers to remove hiring and resume bias showed the benefits that have resulted from this approach. When these companies used traditional hiring methods, they invited only 17 of female applicants in for an interview, eventually hiring 26 percent. Once they started using GapJumpers, these companies invited 58 percent of female applicants in for an interview, 43 percent of whom received a job offer.[115]

Although using blind interventions has proved effective in increasing the number of women interviewed and hired, other companies have focused on increasing the number of female applicants. Previous research has shown that both explicit (e.g., "he") and implicit (e.g., "sympathetic," "care," "empathy") gendered wording in job advertisements maintains gender inequality by dissuading women from applying to positions with a masculine bias and men from applying to positions with a feminine bias.[116]

An analysis of job advertisements showed postings with gender-neutral language were filled 14 days sooner than postings with a masculine or feminine bias.[117] Companies that advertise positions with gender-neutral language also benefit from a more diverse pool of applicants.[118] To reap these benefits, companies such as American Express, Cisco, CVS, Dropbox, eBay, IBM, Lockheed Martin, Microsoft, Starbucks, and Twitter have starting working with the writing-enhancement tool Textio and have reported increases in the percentage of female job candidates.[119,120] The tool analyzes the words used to describe job postings and highlights words associated with positive and negative outcomes as they are typed.[121] Deloitte is not a client of Textio but has used the same techniques to diversify its staff, adapting the language used in all recruiting and marketing materials to be gender neutral.[122] Although an increasing number of companies are using gender-neutral and inclusive language in recruitment efforts, once hired, new employees may find themselves subject to company policies that do not reflect those same efforts.

4. Policy Changes

a. Parental Leave Policies

The United States is the only industrialized nation without federally mandated paid parental leave, but companies such as Cisco, Deloitte, and The Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America-College Retirement Equities Fund (TIAA) are working to turn the tide. One obstacle these companies face is insurance coverage; many companies provide paid leave policies through short-term disability insurance, treating parenthood as a disease to which only women are susceptible. To reduce gender distinctions and include adoptive parents in policies, some companies have implemented paternity leave policies or offer benefits based on primary and secondary caregiver designations. However, these policies still reinforce and perpetuate the traditional homemaker/breadwinner model, which men are often reluctant to contest. Furthermore, maintaining distinctions between a primary and secondary caregiver can put companies in a difficult position. For example, a JPMorgan Chase fraud investigator filed a discrimination charge after learning he would be able to take paid leave only if he were his child's primary caregiver. Cisco adapted its paid leave policy to include gender-neutral language but maintained the distinction in benefits between primary and secondary caregivers. Consistent with previous findings, recent research showed the vast majority of those who took leave as a secondary caregiver were men.[123] Deloitte, which previously offered 3 weeks of paid paternal leave, announced in 2016 it would implement a gender-blind leave policy. Now, regardless of gender or role as caregiver, employees can take off up to 16 weeks. An analysis of the policy found the number of male employees taking leave and the average duration of leave have both increased.[124] TIAA, a financial-services firm, also changed its policy. TIAA previously offered 4 weeks of paid leave to new parents with an additional 6 to 8 weeks for birth mothers; current eligible employees will receive 16 weeks of paid leave irrespective of gender.[125] After Etsy implemented a gender-blind parental leave policy that provides all employees with 26 weeks of paid leave during the first 2 years after birth or adoption, nearly half of those who took leave were men. Importantly, Etsy employees taking leave did not face consequences at work; in fact, 35 percent were promoted in the weeks leading up to, during, or in the weeks following their leave.[126] The benefits of gender-blind programs extend beyond the child; research has shown that "women's professional and economic prospects are hampered when mothers bear a greater share of home and family duties than their partners."[127] Although some companies are beginning to implement gender-blind leave policies, it is important to note that in 2016, only 13 percent of American employees in the private sector and 14 percent of all U.S. civilian workers even had access to paid family leave.[128]

b. State Law and Government Documents

Some cities and counties, such as New York City, allow residents to either not provide their gender or to choose a nonbinary designation on government-issued documents and identification cards; in the past year, several States have demonstrated that these changes are possible at the State level.[129] During the summer of 2017, the District of Columbia and Oregon became the first States in the country to allow residents to choose "X" instead of "male" or "female" on a new or existing driver's license, birth certificate, and identification cards.[130,131] California became the third and Maine the fourth State to implement this policy.[132,133] As the most populous State, California proved that administrative burden is not sufficient justification to continue gender-based discrimination. In 2018, Washington State began allowing residents to change the gender on their birth certificates; however, the State has not yet extended this policy to include driver's licenses.[134] Although legislators in New York State were unable to pass legislation that would create an "X" gender designation on driver's licenses, the State's assembly and senate approved a bill in May of 2018 that would replace all references in State law to "fireman" and "policeman" with "firefighter" and "police officer." The bill is now awaiting approval from the newly reelected Governor Andrew Cuomo.[135]

c. Federal Government Policies

The Federal Government has moved considerably more slowly than either individual organizations or State governments toward removing gendered language, but it has made progress. For example, in 2009, the U.S. House of Representatives decided to remove unnecessary gendered language—which included using a male pronoun in reference to the Office of the President and "chairman"—and opted for "chair" instead.[136] The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), which serves as the human resources agency of the Federal Government, provides guidelines for Federal agencies. OPM encourages agencies to "evaluate, and consider eliminating, where appropriate, gender-specific dress and appearance rules." OPM specifies that employees should use the name and pronoun preferred by the employee when addressing or referring to the employee in all communication.[137] However, the U.S. Department of State has not followed the essence of this guideline, denying U.S. citizen and Navy veteran Dana Zzyym, a U.S. passport on the grounds that Zzyym had refused to select either "male" or "female" on the application. In September of 2018, a U.S. District judge ruled again in favor of Zzyym, denouncing the State Department's decision as both "arbitrary and capricious."[138] Here, gender-neutral and inclusive language enshrined in company, State, and Federal policy can have a powerful effect on society; changing language may indeed change attitudes, behaviors, and opinions.[139]

5. Outcomes and Effects of These Efforts

Research has consistently found that when language is adapted to be gender-neutral and inclusive, rather than gender-specific and sexist, rates of gender stereotyping and discrimination decrease.[140] Self-evaluations and evaluations of others are influenced heavily by language; researchers have shown that women are thought to be less successful in male-dominated occupations when job descriptions include masculine bias.[141] Women were also more likely to self-select out of the hiring process, experiencing a lesser sense of belonging, when positions were described with a masculine bias rather than gender-neutral language.[142] Men and women equally agree that job descriptions written with gender-exclusive language are sexist. However, during in-person interviews, women found this language to be more sexist and often felt ostracized, whereas men found it to be less sexist and did not feel ostracized.[143,144] Using gender-neutral and inclusive language in recruitment and marketing materials diversifies staff and decreases the time a position is left unfilled.[145]

Once hired, employees often face unequal paid leave programs, if paid leave is offered at all. Gender-blind paid leave programs combat the stereotype that caregiving and childcare are roles for women. State or company policies that assume women will be the primary caregivers, or provide the maximum amount of leave only for birth mothers, have been found to be discriminatory and demonstrate the power of bias in language and policy.[146] The use of subtly sexist, gender-specific, exclusionary language "effectively reinforces our acceptance of its debilitating messages about women."[147] Research has shown that men with a greater number of sexist beliefs use "a significantly higher proportion of gender-biased terms."[148] Gender-neutral and inclusive language is learned over time, and when such language is taught, speakers and writers are shown to less frequently use sexist language.[149] As the prevalence of gender-inclusive language increases, the proportion of language that perpetuates sexist beliefs and attitudes decreases.[150]

Chapter 4. Conclusions and Best Practices

This literature review has provided an overview of different forms of gender bias, the media's recent coverage of gender bias in the U.S. military, and examples of how gender-inclusive language is being implemented by U.S. and foreign militaries as well as U.S. commercial workplaces. The research team has synthesized this information into four best practices, as follows:

1. **Broaden communication to be gender-neutral and gender-inclusive.** Research has demonstrated that when language is adapted to be gender-neutral and inclusive, rates of gender stereotyping and discrimination decrease.[151] A wide range of examples detailed in this review—drawn from the military, colleges and universities, and large corporations—show the benefits of gender-neutral language in creating a welcoming, accessible working environment for people of all genders. Language is a powerful and pervasive tool that shapes cultural and social attitudes; therefore, using gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language can be a way to promote gender equality and reduce harmful bias.[152]

2. **Remove gender indicators from processes in which bias is likely to occur.** Conscious and unconscious gender bias can plague professional and working environments even when equality and diversity are organizational priorities. Indicators of gender in a hiring or selection process can hinder women's progress in the workplace. When applicable, a blind intervention, or removing personal information indicative of gender, has been demonstrated to increase gender diversity within these processes.[153] Implementing gender-blind practices and policies, especially in areas in which bias is likely to occur, will help reduce the effect of conscious and unconscious gender bias.

3. **Eliminate gendered policies when gender may hinder implementation.** Policies and programs related to gender, especially ones that potentially reinforce gendered stereotypes, may create false limitations based on gender. For instance, paternal leave policies that restrict men's ability to take parental leave or designate them as secondary caregivers and assume women to be primary caregivers may dissuade men from utilizing leave even when they are legally afforded the opportunity.[154] Policies and programs that are designed in gendered ways may continue to encourage gendered behavior, thus reinforcing common biases and stereotypes that counter equality.

4. **Rely on information from diverse groups to inform language choices.** When organizations or companies seek to implement gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language and policies, diverse voices must be represented in all aspects of the discussion and implementation process.[155] Diverse representation of people and organizational status, including leaders and workers at all levels, will increase the perspective and vision needed to create changes that respect and acknowledge all parties involved.

Despite significant progress towards gender equality over the past several decades, conscious and unconscious gender bias continue to persist. Gendered language represents a critical, yet often overlooked, vestige of women's historical exclusion from American civic life, the military, and the professional workplace. Gender-specific language sends explicit and implicit signals communicating value, status, and power in society and may also bring undue attention to gender when it is not necessary or relevant.

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