

## More chairs, please

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Those hoping for progress towards gender equality in UK big business shouldn't expect to see it any time soon. The Financial Times recently reported a **slowdown in female appointments** to FTSE 100 boards, according to data from the Professional Boards Forum (PBF).

Key findings include the following gloomy facts:

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- just 12 per cent of directors appointed in the two months to 1 May 2013 are women, compared with 50 per cent in 2012
- the proportion of women on FTSE 100 boards hasn't budged from 17.4% since last August
- a minute 5.6% of the group's executive directors are women

Sadly, this state of affairs is hardly surprising when you consider the hash the very people pushing for change seem to be making of getting their message across. Let's start with the Professional Boards Forum itself. Besides tracking the number of female board appointments to fill bleak column inches, the forum's **proclaimed mission** is to 'help chairmen find outstanding women non-executive directors'.

That's right. Their raison d'être is to help 'chairMEN'.

Now I used to be one of those 'chairman/shnairman' type people, who'd shrug and say 'it's just shorthand, everyone knows it doesn't mean it has to be a man'. But then I realised that, really, using a gender neutral term like 'chair' was probably preferable given that it didn't invisibilise around one half of the human race.

Perhaps the PBF should consider that. What's not to like about ditching an outmoded and sexist term which undermines their whole argument? Surely those purporting to push for gender equality should endeavour to do what US feminist writers Miller & Swift neatly describe as 'trying to free their language from unconscious semantic bias', a parry to the 'messages of prejudice' that the unwitting use of gendered language can otherwise emit.

As Miller & Swift [1] argue in *'The Handbook of Non-sexist Writing'* – first published back in 1980, people – 'much of the unconscious bias embedded in modern English stems from cultural attitudes toward women, and, to a lesser but significant extent, from cultural expectations damaging to men'. Arguably the persistent use of 'chairman' exemplifies a 'standard English usage [which] says... [males] are the species... females are a subspecies'.

The media might also want to have a rethink. The FT's own style is to refer to 'chairmen' and 'chairwomen', according to the sex of the office holder. A quick search reveals the BBC, The Telegraph, The Economist, The New Statesman, The Independent, The Guardian, The Express and The Mirror do likewise. Clearly this is better than the forum's approach, recognising as it does that both men and women can – and do – head boards. Yet it's still problematic, not least because the rule is applied inconsistently, with women chairs frequently referred to as men. In a recent **diary piece** I wrote for The Telegraph, for example, Lady Barbara Judge appeared as 'chairman of the Pensions Protection Board', despite being 'chair' in my original copy. Does anyone know of a male chair who is routinely referred to as 'chairwoman'?

And even if the 'chairman/woman' rule is always followed, what about the people who identify as neither male or female? Reinforcing gender binaries is not the way to go for those seeking genuine diversity – however remote that goal may seem at times.

Language matters, as theorists from Lacan, to Fanon through to post-structuralist feminists such as Wendy Brown and Judith Butler have been at pains to point out. In the seminal *Gender Trouble* [2], the latter highlights what is at stake when we make linguistic choices, asking: '[H]ow does language construct the categories of sex? ... How does language itself produce the fictional construction of "sex" that supports [the] various regimes of power?'

The words we choose have the power to include or exclude, to encourage or dissuade, to foster change or to promote more of the same. By adopting the gender-neutral 'chair', groups like the PFB and the media have the opportunity to set a new, inclusive tone which sends the message that seats at the boardroom table are not reserved for men alone.

[1] Miller, C., and Swift, K., (1980). *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*. California: Harper & Row

[2] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

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