

**Re-framing Stereotypes of Gender Equality in India: A  
Feminist Linguistic Perspective with Special Reference to the  
*HANDBOOK ON COMBATING GENDER STEREOTYPES***

Dr. Pankaj Rajasibhai Shingrakhiya

Department of English,

Shree V M Mehta Muni. Arts and Commerce College

Jamnagar, Gujrat, India

[drpankajvmmcollege@gmail.com](mailto:drpankajvmmcollege@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

Language is the means of communication from the ages and in India we have so many languages. In India we still think English is for those for who are educated and well cultured in nature but this a stereotype that is associated with us. The other stereotype in our society is that English Language is considered better in terms of its usage of stating higher aspects intellectuality and we somewhere do not feel or know the correct usage of the words and its denoted meanings. Thus, it may lead us to confusion and sometimes it can create more stereotypes like some typical words based on Castes, Genders, and Ethnicity etc. In this age we are consuming so much of international content and

English language that the people pick up slangs and phrases form the language and start using it.

This paper aims in deliberating the use of English language in breaking on one such stereotype that is Gender. How words and their meanings can change the ways we perceive Gender. The language can be a major tool to reduce the gap between Gender Equality. The major aspect of this paper takes the reference of the Handbook Combating Gender Stereotypes which is compiled by the supreme court of India. The paper will take the handbook to analyse and reflect

that need of the law of country like us breaking some pre-conceived notion of English Language and its usage in Indian Constitution and Society.

**Keywords:** Language, Stereotypes, Gender, Equality, Constitution, Law, Society.

### **Introduction**

The term Language has multiple definitions given by so many scholars in the past. Greek scholar Aristotle has called language as speech sound produce by human being to express their ideas, emotions, thoughts, desires and feelings. Where one of the great linguists in the world Ferdinand De Saussure defines language as an arbitrary system of signs constituted of the signifier and signified. The definition by Saussure seems more technical in terms of language but we study that well, we come to know about how there is an idea of Post-Structuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida who believed that there is no particular meaning to a same word.

Words are signs that lead to a signified meaning and that meaning is associated with a signifier which has an understanding of its own. Sometimes the word that we want as a signified can be misunderstood as well we doesn't get to the proper signified because our sign is does not hold only one meaning. Post-structuralist theory suggests that the concept of 'truth' is tricky – if not impossible – to pin down. This is because the link between signifier and signified is not as fixed as structuralists believed due to the influence of multiple factors. Derrida who is known as one of the most influential post-structural thinkers, in his lecture Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences he identifies a tendency for philosophers to denounce each other for relying on problematic discourse, and argues that this reliance is to some degree inevitable because we can only write in the language we inherit. Discussing the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Derrida argues that we are all 'bricoleurs', creative thinkers who must use the tools we find around us.

Language that we use states what we collectively mean in the society, thus the use of

language can be stereotyped very easily. We as language users tend to mean something other but do not use the proper word for it so; it becomes difficult to be not derogative and means something which we want to explain. In this case as the paper tries to examine how language creates stereotypes in Gender Equality. Gender equality is a very sensitive topic in this modern age. Women are fighting for Gender Equality in society from almost 18th century and there are some improvements in terms of their social, political, economical, and educational equality as well.

There has been many amendment in judiciary and in society in past to provide women with their rights in the world. One of the major amendments was right to vote for women, especially in Europe. England gave right to vote to women through Equal Franchise Act 1928. New Zealand became the first country provide right to vote for women in 1893. In America The 19th Amendment makes it illegal to deny the right to vote to any citizen based on their sex, which effectively granted women the right to vote. It was first introduced to Congress in 1878 and was finally certified 42 years later in 1920. After the right to vote, there erupted the waves of feminism in the world and they demanded different things from the society. The sole purpose of those demands was to make woman in equivalence to a man.

Almost every other thing shaped and tried to change in according with creating an equal society where women are without stereotypes accept language. Language is one of the major means of creating a stereotype because as soon as it has a concrete meaning to word, which might not be appropriate in that situation, especially for women, it can lead to misunderstood and derogatory sense for a woman. In this case there are no solid measurements taken by the society. When it comes to English, we use words like sex and gender to denote the same meanings. English is colonial language for us a society but we have developed good sense of the language and so many people across the nation uses it on daily basis. Yet, as mentioned earlier we still need a change in the scenario where we must not use typical words for typical

situations and especially when it is about women, one must have be more careful about usage words, slangs, phrases and proved or idioms that we use in depicting the character or any attribute of them.

This has to change if we as a society want to be more liberal and equal to women. The language that we use should change, the linguistics and use of those words must change, the words which are not that suitable to describe a woman should not be used. All of these need a paradigm shift in our linguistics. In doing that, our honorable supreme court has taken a great step in creating awareness. The Supreme Court has published a handbook which denotes what are the words that should not be used anymore in judicial terminology for describing women or describing situations in and around women. The title of the book is Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes published on 16th of August, 2023.

The initiative by the Court is very acute move analyse how women are termed in Judiciary and if the Supreme Court has produce a handbook it means it would be applied in the whole judiciary system in India. The forward of the handbook is written by the Chief Justice of India, Dr. Justice Dhananjaya Y Chandrachud. In this forwards he states that “The oath taken by judges requires a judge to put aside any preconceived notions about the parties before the court. Relying on predetermined stereotypes in judicial decision-making contravenes the duty of judges to decide each case on its merits, independently and impartially. In particular, reliance on stereotypes about women is liable to distort the law’s application to women in harmful ways.”

He further says that “Even when the use of stereotypes does not alter the outcome of a case, stereotypical language may reinforce ideas contrary to our constitutional ethos. Language is critical to the life of the law. Words are the vehicle through which the values of the law are communicated. Words transmit the ultimate intention of the lawmaker or the judge to the nation. However, the language a judge uses reflects not only their interpretation of the law, but

their perception of society as well. Where the language of judicial discourse reflects antiquated or incorrect ideas about women, it inhibits the transformative project of the law and the Constitution of India, which seek to secure equal rights to all persons, irrespective of gender”

As India's Chief Justice feels that the initiative can change judicial terminology for women in their proceedings and judgments then it would somewhere reflect in the society and it can lead to a very positive shift in terms of Gender Equality and breaking stereotypes.

### **Defining Stereotype:**

As defined in the Oxford dictionary a stereotype is a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offense. The focus here is on the fixed idea which often not true, because in language there are so many words that are defined for one meaning but they might lead to a meaning which can hurt or offend people. In case of Gender equality and special case for women there are words in modern slangs just as Slut, Frumpy, and Shrill and there phrases like to be sissy, to wear a trousers relationship etc.

### **Structural and Post-structural idea of language:**

As mentioned in the introduction there was a movement in literary criticism which was called Post-structuralism. The idea of post-structuralism was to provide a rational view to its predecessors: the structuralists like Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Althassur who believed the focus in language was not in speech (parol) but rather on underlying system (langue).

They believed that there is a sign for every signifier which can lead to signified in the concept or the meaning associated with signifier. Saussure emphasizes that the meaning arises from the difference between the language system and the comparison of signs. In a language system, signs can only be interpreted based on the difference with one signs.

The concept of sign, signifier and signifier can be applied any word but what post-structuralist thinkers who came in 1960s and 1970s. They challenged the interpretations of

language and texts in humanities. If we take language as structure, then a particular word gain its meaning due to the existence of the structure. The structuralists emphasized on the idea that truth and reality was to identify within the structure. Post-structuralists criticized the foundation of structuralism. For them there was no reality or truth. They believed that in order to understand something it was necessary to study not only the subject itself but also in system of knowledge, since it can misinterpreted.

The need of the source text, *The Handbook on combating Gender Stereotype* can fall into category of this practice if deconstruction of meaning. The main point to deconstructionist like Jacques Derrida's theory of is to show that the meaning of a work or in this case the word is unstable and could have multiple of alternative meanings, so the meaning could easily be at the center as it could be marginalized.

Derrida rejects the binary definitions in western philosophy. There are binaries like man/woman, mind/body, and culture/nature. Derrida believes that if there are binaries, then one is in the center and the other is automatically marginalized. In this context for i.e. we use the word 'Man' for working men and we use the word 'Working Woman' for woman. The word Man is in the center and woman is marginalized. Connecting this theory into the *Handbook* which provides more specific words for different used. As India's Chief Justice Dr. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud states in the forward that the book is for judiciary to be more exact and precisely the treatment of using a particular word for women and things related to women, which should not lead to any other meaning rather that what is there in the idea of in the mind.

Taking it forward to when we believed that language can be stereotypical for gender. In English we have many words for women and other gender which are derogatory and should not be used. For example words like Bitch, Bimbo, Cat lady, Virago, these words can be pejorative when used for women. These words are cultural archetypes which are the part of

day to day language.

### **Feminism in Language**

Feminist language theory refers to the efforts, often political and grassroots movements to change how language is used to gender people, activities and ideas on the individual and societal level. The main focus of feminist language theory is to acknowledge the often unconscious ways of the language both silence and emphasis gender in negative ways. In reference to our source text, The Handbook, that there were judgments in Indian courts in the past in which the court has stated language which leads to stereotypical beliefs in language for i.e in 2017, Kerala High Court has said 'A girl aged 24 years is weak and vulnerable, capable of being exploited in many ways' (14, Handbook)

A major part of Feminist language theory focuses on a word or phrase that make on gender typical a woman subjugated or invisible compare to other. The words that we use in language must be specified in more positive manner and it should be known that the word 'sex' and the word 'gender' are completely different phenomenon in language. The Handbook itself states that society describes roles to specific genders, most often seen in the context of men and women. For example Men are often believed to be more suited to professional jobs whereas women are believed to more emergence of public and private sphere in the society which is denoted by role of gender but this should not be the case.

The Handbook has given the list of words for judiciary to use it more specifically for women and it is to believe that if the judge, lawyers and everyone involved in the judiciary use these alternate words. It can create a positive effect on society for breaking the stereotypes for women and gender equally.

**The table given underneath shows the words that were there and the alternative words:**

Stereotype promoting language (INCORRECT)	Alternative language (PREFERRED)
Adulteress	Woman who has engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage
Affair	Relationship outside of marriage
Bastard	Non-marital child or, a child whose parents were not married
Biological sex / biological male / biological female	Sex assigned at birth
Born a girl / boy	Assigned female / male at birth
Career woman	Woman
Carnal intercourse	Sexual intercourse
Chaste woman	Woman
Child prostitute	Child who has been trafficked
Concubine / keep	Woman with whom a man has had romantic or sexual relations outside of marriage
Dutiful wife / Faithful wife / Good wife / Obedient wife	Wife
Easy virtue (e.g., a woman of easy virtue)	Woman
Effeminate (when used pejorative-ly)	Accurately describe the characteristic using a gender neutral term (e.g., confident or responsible)
Eve teasing	Street sexual harassment
Faggot	Accurately describe the individual's sexual orientation (e.g., homosexual or bisexual)
Fallen woman	Woman
Feminine hygiene products	Menstrual products
Forcible rape	Rape

Harlot	Woman
Hermaphrodite	Intersex
Hooker	Sex worker
Hormonal (to describe a woman's emotional state)	Use a gender neutral term to describe the emotion (e.g., compassionate or enthusiastic)
Housewife	Homemaker
Indian woman / western woman	Woman
Ladylike	Use a gender neutral description of behaviour or characteristics (e.g., amusing or assertive)
Layabout / Shirker	Unemployed
Marriageable age	A woman who has attained the legal age required to marry
Mistress	Woman with whom a man has had romantic or sexual relations outside of marriage
Prostitute*	Sex worker
Provider / Breadwinner	Employed or earning
Provocative clothing / dress	Clothing / dress
Ravished (e.g., she was "ravished" by him)	Sexually harassed / assaulted or raped
Seductress	Woman
Sex change	Sex reassignment or gender transition
Slut	Woman
Spinster	Unmarried woman
Survivor or Victim? An individual who has been affected by sexual violence may identify themselves as either a "survivor" or "victim". Both terms are applicable unless the individual has expressed a preference, in which case the individual's preference should be respected.	
Transsexual	Transgender
Transvestite	Cross-dresser
Unwed Mother	Mother
Violated (e.g., he violated her)	Sexually harassed / assaulted or raped

Whore	Woman
Woman of loose morals / easy virtue / promiscuous woman / wanton woman	Woman

If the word usage changes in culture and society, the language would hold a different meaning and on micro-level, the stereotypes would not lead to exclusive and discrimination in workplace, education institutes and public places.

The Handbook further tries to understand the Gender stereotypes. When we already know that the words ‘Gender’ and ‘Sex’ are not the same, there are just assumptions about the characteristics that particular gender have or roles that they perform. In this case one of the major feminist theorists

Simon de Beauvoir in her work *Second Sex* 1949 has said that ‘One is not born, rather becomes a woman’. A word ‘Woman’ is a gender based, someone can be a female and societal archetypes and stereotype make her all women, they make her perform all the previous generation has done the same and generation prior to that and so and so forth.

The Handbook has given specific clarification of what stereotypes are there in the society about the women as gender and what can be the actual reality.

Stereotype	Reality
Women are overly emotional, illogical, and cannot take decisions.	A person’s gender does not determine or influence their capacity for rational thought.
All women are physically weaker than all men.	While men and women are physiologically different, it is not true that all women are physically weaker than all men. A person’s strength does not depend solely on their gender but also on factors such as their profession, genetics, nutrition, and physical activity.
Women are more passive.	People display a wide range of personality traits. Both men and women can be (or may not be) passive. Women are not more passive than men as a rule.

Women are warm, kind, and compassionate.	Compassion is an acquired characteristic that is unique to every individual. Individuals of all genders can possess (or not possess) compassion.
Unmarried women (or young women) are incapable of taking important decisions about their lives. <sup>2</sup>	Marriage has no bearing on an individual's ability to take decisions. The law defines specific ages for persons to consent to certain activities, e.g., marriage or consuming alcohol, and all individuals of or above this age are deemed to be capable of taking such decisions irrespective of marriage.
Women of oppressed or marginalised communities have diminished cognitive capabilities or a limited understanding of the world. <sup>3</sup>	The community an individual belongs to is not determinative of their cognitive capabilities or their understanding of the world.
All women want to have children. <sup>4</sup>	All women do not want to have children. Deciding to become a parent is an individual choice that every person takes based on a variety of circumstances.
Women should be submissive or subordinate to men.	The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to individuals of all genders. Women are neither subordinate to men nor do they need to be submissive to anybody.

The stereotypes shown in the table above suggests that language and our believe makes the cultural and gender archetypes in the society then society goes on to believing what is prescribed them. The terms and the clarification given in the Handbook can be very accurate not only in judiciary but in society, if we try and be more careful about our usage of words and language for that matter.

The Handbook has given clarification about the past judgments in which few judges and other judicial personal has made a mistake in stating the right words in their judgment and which led to the wrong messaging and creating more stereotypical terms of language. The Handbook has given tables in which they clarified on our belief in the society what we all think that for women.

Stereotype	Reality
<p>“Good” women prefer death rather than being raped by a man.</p>	<p>It is a patriarchal and harmful belief that women should prefer death rather than being raped by a man. Such beliefs may cause survivors / victims to consider suicide because they have been raped by a man.</p>
<p>Indian women behave differently from Western women or women of other countries after a man has sexually assaulted or raped them.</p>	<p>Each woman reacts to sexual violence based on her personality, social circumstances, upbringing, and other factors. It is not possible to categorise the reactions of women to sexual violence based on the country or region from which they hail. There is no “correct” or “appropriate” reaction to being raped and all reactions are equally valid.</p>
<p>Transgender individuals cannot be raped.</p>	<p>Transgender individuals can be raped. In fact, transgender individuals are one of the groups which are most vulnerable to sexual violence because they are stigmatised and face structural discrimination. It is incorrect to assume that all transgender individuals are sex workers who always consent to sexual relations.</p>
<p>If a woman does not scream for help, attack the rapist or if she does not have any injuries on her body such as cuts and scrapes, she has not been raped.<sup>13</sup></p>	<p>A woman who is facing sexual violence by a man may not be in the position to attack him. Rapists frequently threaten survivors / victims with death and even threaten to kill their family members if they attempt to resist. Moreover, injuries such as cuts and scrapes may not always result even if the woman attempts to resist as the rapist may overpower her.</p>

As mentioned in the table, the beliefs and traditions in the society sometimes can be very challenging in terms how we examine and personify victim. It may be a male or female but the point here remains is that no one should fall prey to stereotype like this especially is judiciary. Thus, the Handbook here has applied well and reflected in society it can create revolution in a society in the way we use language and the way we are perceived the term Gender and Sex.

There have been similar efforts in other countries as well; something was done by academia and court's practitioners for example 'The women's court of Canada'. The contributors of the Handbook are Juma Sen, Co-Convener of the Indian Feminist Judgments Project, with several others.

### **Conclusion**

Language is the way of communicating our thoughts and feelings. Then language also is one of the major tools to change the ways meanings during the shift in culture and times. Language itself is constantly changing and evolving phenomenon and the way we use the language especially as the society that says and reflects about how we evolve, educated, be liberated as Human race. Language has played a major role in shaping our culture, beliefs, and thinking pattern and stereotypes as well. As an American labor leader and civil rights activist, Cesar Chavez said "Our language is an exact reflection of ourselves. A language is an exact reflection of the character and growth of its speakers"

Thus, the initiative of the source text of the paper is one such step in shaping our collective consciousness towards the better use of language and it should not be limited to the judiciary only, if we as society try and use our words carefully then it can make a lit difference in dismantling and combating the gender stereotypes in our society.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Copyright:** © 2025 by Dr. Pankaj Rajasibhai Shingrakhya Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

**License:** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

### Works Cited

India. Supreme Court. Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes. 2023.

Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. 1995.

4th ed., Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017.

“Category: Pejorative Terms for Women.” Wikipedia, 8 Nov. 2023,

[en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Pejorative\\_terms\\_for\\_women](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Pejorative_terms_for_women). Accessed 10 Jan.

2024.

De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. London, Vintage Classics, 1949.

Edit, T. O. I. “Language, Milords: SC’s Handbook Aimed at Removing Sexist Descriptors for

Women Will Hopefully Clean up Judicial Discourse.” The Times of India,

[www.google.com/amp/s/timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/language-](https://www.google.com/amp/s/timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/language-milords-scs-handbook-aimed-at-removing-sexist-descriptors-for-women-will-hopefully-clean-up-judicial-discourse/)

[milords-scs-handbook-aimed-at-removing-sexist-descriptors-for-women-will-](https://www.google.com/amp/s/timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/language-milords-scs-handbook-aimed-at-removing-sexist-descriptors-for-women-will-hopefully-clean-up-judicial-discourse/)

[hopefully-clean-up-judicial-discourse/](https://www.google.com/amp/s/timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/language-milords-scs-handbook-aimed-at-removing-sexist-descriptors-for-women-will-hopefully-clean-up-judicial-discourse/). Accessed 10 Jan. 2024.

El Masmodi, Issam. The Key Ideas of Jacques Derrida in His Essays “Structure, Sign and Play

in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” and “Différance.” München, GRIN Verlag,

2019.

“Fighting Stereotypes: The Hindu Editorial on the Handbook on Combating Gender

Stereotypes.” The Hindu, 17 Aug. 2023,

[www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/fighting-stereotypes-](https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/fighting-stereotypes-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-handbook-on-combating-genderstereotypes/article67204889.ece/amp/)

[the-hindu-editorial-on-the-handbook-on-combating-](https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/fighting-stereotypes-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-handbook-on-combating-genderstereotypes/article67204889.ece/amp/)

[genderstereotypes/article67204889.ece/amp/](https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/fighting-stereotypes-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-handbook-on-combating-genderstereotypes/article67204889.ece/amp/). Accessed 10 Jan. 2024.

Luu, Chi. “The Language of Nasty Women (and Other Gendered Insults).” JSTOR Daily, 9

Nov. 2016, [daily.jstor.org/the-language-of-nasty-women-and-other-gendered-insults/](https://daily.jstor.org/the-language-of-nasty-women-and-other-gendered-insults/).

Sieck, Winston. “Language of Stereotypes.” Global Cognition, 20 Aug. 2012,

[www.globalcognition.org/language-of-stereotypes/](https://www.globalcognition.org/language-of-stereotypes/).

“Stereotypes.” European Institute for Gender Equality, 9 June 2023,

[eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-sensitive-communication/challenges/stereotypes-how-language-manifests-gender-related-stereotypes?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-sensitive-communication/challenges/stereotypes-how-language-manifests-gender-related-stereotypes?language_content_entity=en).