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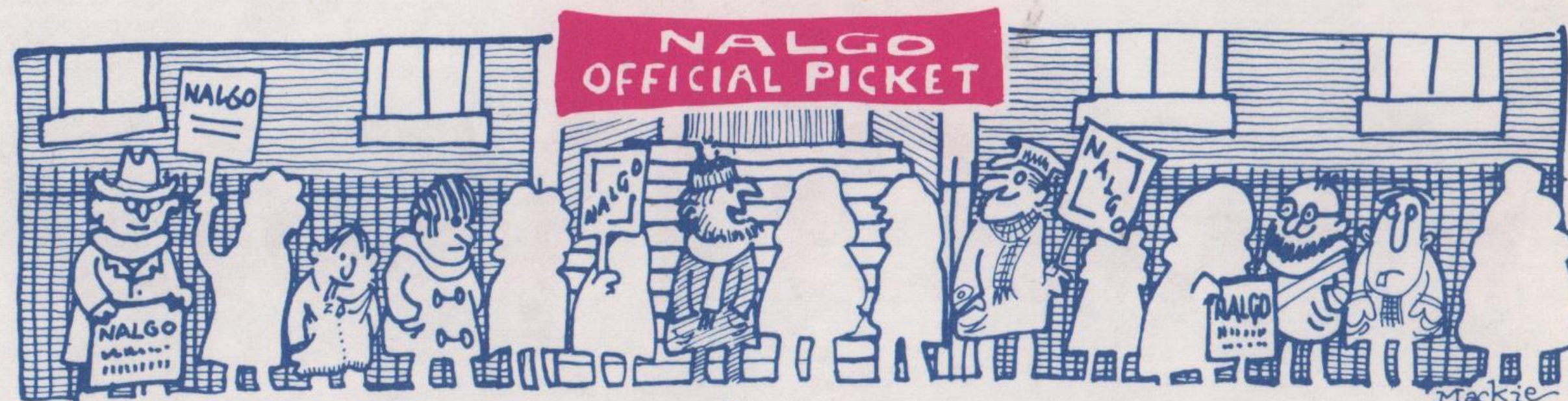
- Positive Action for Women Workers
- Organising for Equal Opportunity
- Adoption, the Right to Continue Working

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Watch your language!

NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE: A GUIDE FOR NALGO MEMBERS





NALGO MEMBERS "MAN" A PICKET LINE (SPOT THE UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE ORGANISERS)

HOW PREJUDICE IS REINFORCED

Trade unionists have long fought for equality for women at work – equal pay, access to training, better childcare provision – and trade unionists have recognised that the education system, together with the media, can and do perpetuate women's inferior position.

But it's only recently that we've begun to realise that prejudice against women can be reinforced by the very language we use in our day-to-day dealings with one another – everyday words and phrases which help to form and perpetuate a discriminatory and patronising attitude.

A much-discussed example is "chairperson". To insist on this term has been considered trivial by many, but it really is important.

It is not good enough to say that everyone knows that "chairman" includes women if the mental image you conjure up is always that of a man. Where women are non-existent in language, they will be non-existent in our minds.

When men begin to take on jobs that have been traditionally done by women and which have feminine titles, those titles are automatically changed. No accusations of triviality are made; it is obvious – no man would take on a female title.

Matrons become senior or divisional nursing officers; ward sisters become

charge nurses. But when women want to change "chairman" to "chairperson", things tend to get very heated!

Language *does* matter – as subtle and corrosive as the drip of water on a stone, the words we use inevitably maintain women's position as second class citizens.

This leaflet is intended to show how this happens and how this process can be reversed by speakers, writers, committee clerks and any other NALGO members who want to free their language from unconscious bias.

NALGO's recent membership survey indicated that our women members are concentrated in low-graded, low-paid routine work and rarely offered training or promotion. Despite good policies and increasingly good equal opportunities organisation, things have not improved since 1974.

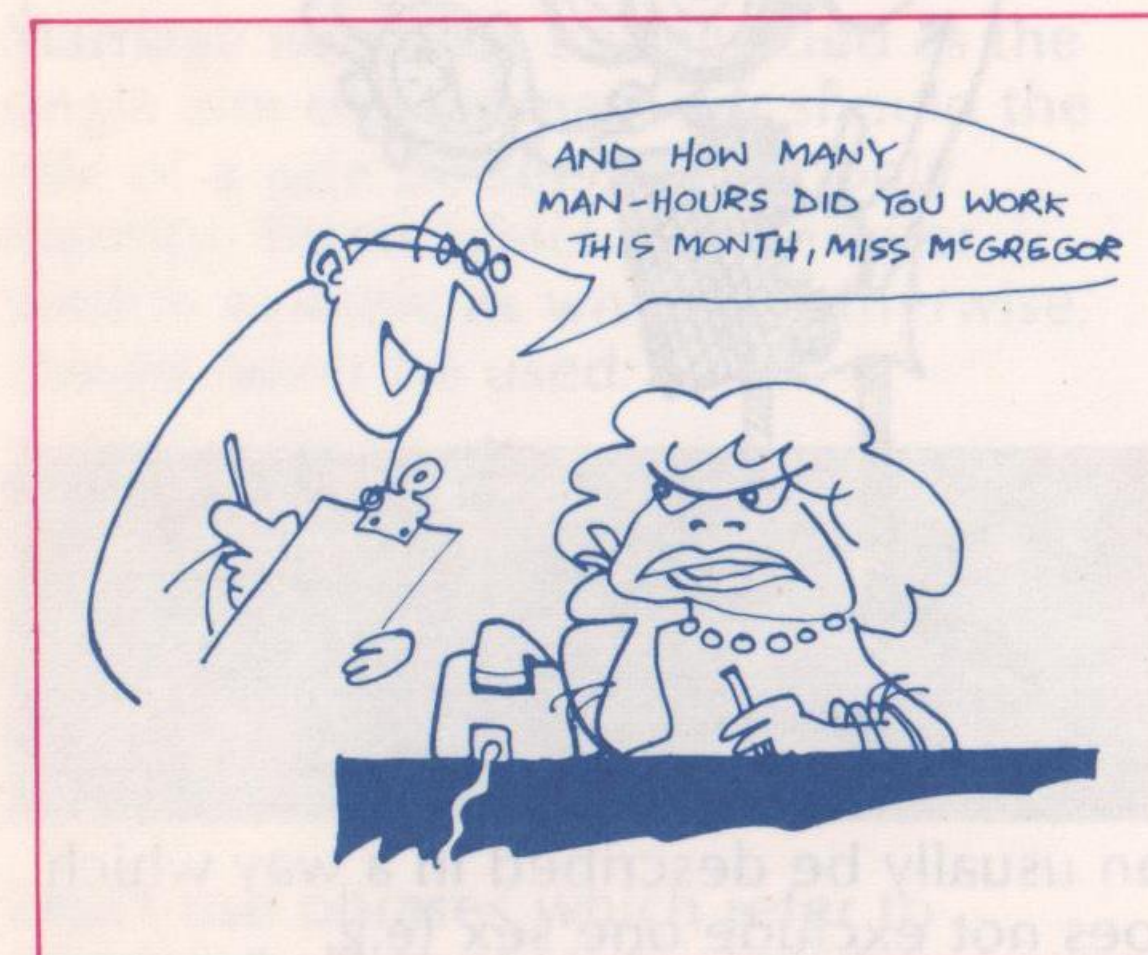
The way we see women and "women's work" is reflected and reinforced by the language we use and this must inevitably contribute to their continued inferiority.

We do not set out to lay down *rules*, merely suggestions for alternatives. These will not always work, and you may have to find other ways of saying what you want to say in ways which encourage equality.

HOW DOES BIAS HAPPEN?

Language can exclude women. The words "man", "he", "his" and "him" are

often used in referring to human beings of either sex. This can't be seen as purely and simply a literary convention, because it gives the distinct impression to the reader that women are absent, silent or simply of no importance.



When you are talking about either or both sexes, but not specifically the male sex, avoid the words "man" and "men". Instead use "person", "people", "human beings", "men and women".

Composite words, too, which involve the use of "man" can almost always be replaced by a word which is neutral.

EXAMPLE	Possible alternative*
MANpower	Workforce; staff
MANning	Staffing; workforce; working; running
MAN-made	Artificial
To a MAN	Everyone; without exception; unanimously
Man-hours	Work hours

*depending on meaning and use

Don't use meaningless or stereotyping expressions such as man-size (= large?) or manhandle (= handle roughly)

Avoiding "he", "his" and "him" can be more difficult, since the repeated use of "he or she", "his or hers", "him or her" can be cumbersome. Here, a useful formula

may be to recast the sentence into the plural.

EXAMPLES:

(1) "One of the most important duties of a shop steward is to discuss problems with his members"

could be recast as

"One of the most important duties of shop stewards is to discuss problems with their members"

or

"One of the most important duties of shop stewards is to discuss problems with members"

(2) "The shop steward is no longer just a grievance processor. He is an adviser, a local labour leader and very-likely a community activist".

can be replaced by this single sentence

"The shop steward is no longer just a grievance processor, but is also an adviser, a local labour leader, and very likely a community activist."

Assumptions that all adults, children or animals are male should not be made. Similarly, avoid the idea that all readers are male.

EXAMPLE:

"Retired members and their wives"

should be rewritten as

"Retired members and their partners"

STEREOTYPING

Biased language reinforces the stereotyping of men and women and stereotyping paints a false picture of reality. For instance, the stereotype of a "normal" British family depicted by television advertisements, with two children, working father and full-time "housewife" is seriously flawed – it only represents FIVE PER CENT of households in reality.

THE FACTS ARE 63% of women work outside the home
59% of married women go out to work

Not only do the vast majority of women work because they can't afford not to, but most of them run a house at the same time.

It's time that we started to represent women's lives as they really are, and to do that, we must explode the tired myths that the advertising world finds so appealing.

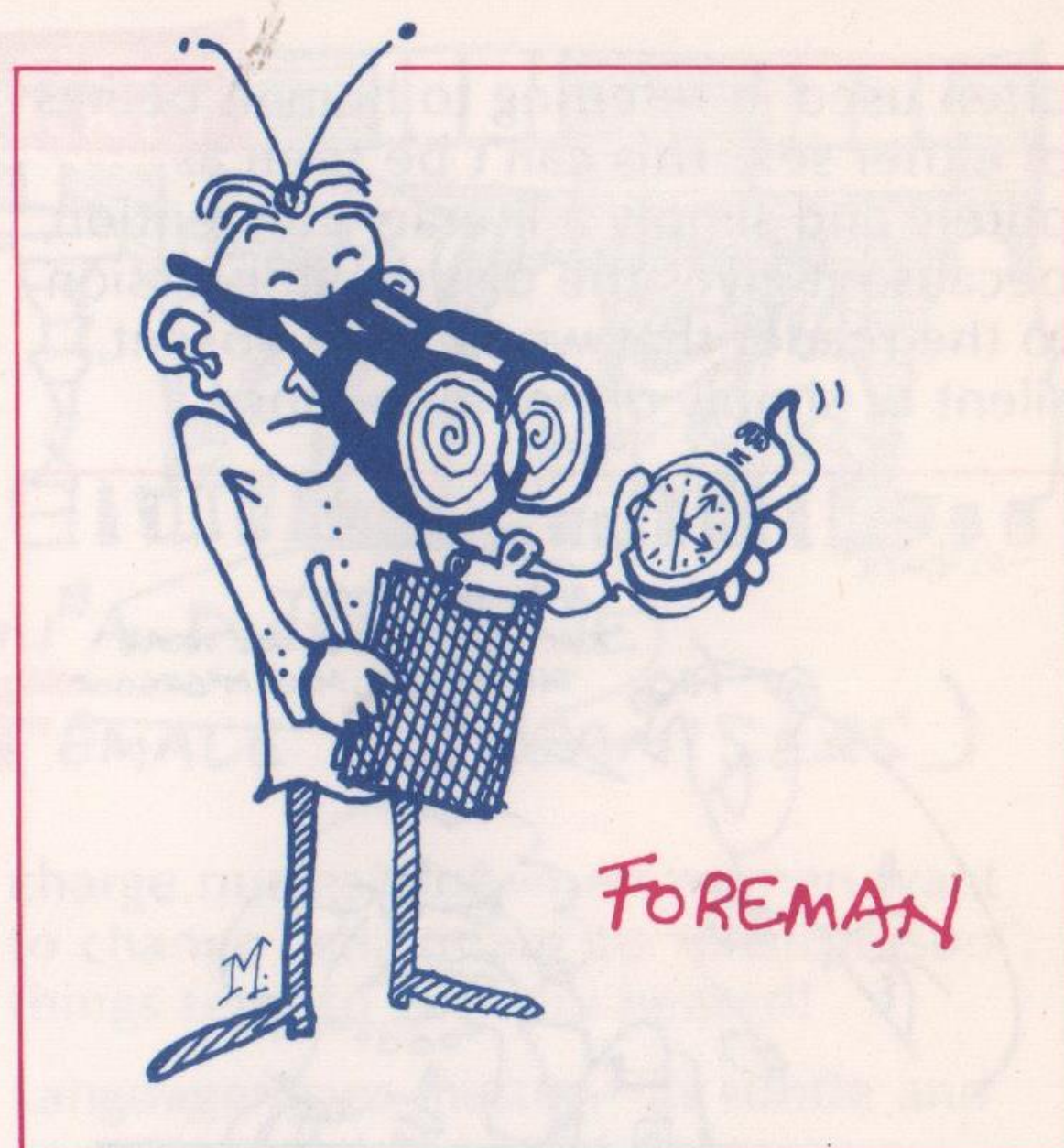
SEX-TYPING OF JOBS

Women should not be typecast as catering workers or secretaries, but should be shown in a wide range of jobs. A large number of men are nurses and clerical workers, so it shouldn't be assumed that these, or any of the professions, are a female preserve. Women should be shown in positions of authority, and there should be no loss of male prestige if a man's supervisor is a woman.

To divide jobs into "men's work" and "women's work" is often inaccurate and always perpetuates discrimination. Jobs



CHAIRMAN



can usually be described in a way which does not exclude one sex (e.g. policeman = police, railwaymen = railway workers).

In most NALGO services, jobs have unisex titles, like "Environmental Health Officers", "Medical Records Officers" but – take care – the following examples show where we fall down, making assumptions that certain jobs belong to certain sexes, or are generally suitable for only one sex:

"The essential qualities for a care attendant are sensitivity, a sense of humour and a willingness to listen and learn. Many women are suited to this work."

"Discretion should be afforded to the appropriate Chief Officer or his appointed representative"

SEX-TYPING OF HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS

Both sexes should be shown as having human strengths and weaknesses, not masculine and feminine ones. Men can be gentle and women courageous. Men can also be nervous and self-effacing, while women can be aggressive and

insensitive. No aspect of human behaviour is the sole property of one sex, so aspects of shared behaviour should be shown.

MARRIAGE

Marriage need not be regarded as the single aim of a woman, nor should the role of a wife be seen as her only identity. Terms which patronise or belittle women, as wives or otherwise, should never be used:

the better half	the little woman
the weaker sex	the fair sex
dumb blondes	libber

Don't use phrases which refer to women through their husbands.

"Architect's wife Elsie Smith"
or
"Philip Grey and his wife Jean"

are terms which should not be used. Elsie and Jean have their own identities and personalities.

AND PLEASE REMEMBER . . .

Girls are female humans under 18 years of age. After that they become women.

Use of the term "ladies" or "lady" usually sounds patronising and condescending, and sometimes it has the effect of seeming to indicate a bizarre breed of creature which sometimes crops up miles away from its natural environment, as in this example from a local branch newsletter:

"It is said that 52% of NALGO membership are ladies, and a number of branches certainly are reflecting this fact by the number at Conference".

For most purposes, "woman" is accurate and appropriate.



ENGLISHMAN

WOMEN IN THE UNIONS

It should be recognised that women participate in trade union activities and that the term "trade unionist" does not only refer to men.

In fact, over half of NALGO's members are women.

Nor is trade union activity a male prerogative. The famous Liverpool typists' dispute was one example of a group of NALGO women members taking industrial action to improve their position within the workforce. Women have been particularly active, too, in the struggle for a decent pay rise by NHS workers. There are many more examples. But often trade union officers both at national and at local level fail to recognise fully the contribution that women make.

BRANCH RULES

Branch rules often read as if NALGO branches were only made up of men. The following are examples of sexist bias which commonly occur in branch rules.

"The rights, privileges and liabilities of each member shall be personal to himself. . ."

"The Branch Secretary shall convene meetings. . .he shall act. . .on his retirement, he shall hand over. . ."

"The Chairman shall exercise the prerogative. . ."

At the 1982 NALGO conference, the national rules were amended so that, for the first time, women were recognised in the formal structures of the Association. A number of branches and at least one District Council have now made similar amendments and the Model Rules for branches and districts will be following suit.

Do your branch rules contain phrases like the previous examples? Do they explicitly recognise that women are members and sometimes officers? If branch rules contain sexist bias, they should be rewritten. Where problems

occur, advice on how to change the wording is available from Headquarters.

LETTERS

There are numerous examples of woman-blindness in the terminology often used by trade unionists in letter writing.

EXAMPLE	Possible alternative
Dear Brother	Dear Brother/Sister (to a trade unionist) Dear Colleague (to anyone else)
Dear Sir	Dear Madam/Sir

When you know the name of the person to whom you are writing but do not know her/him personally or her/his sex, a now commonly used form is 'Dear Chris Smith'. This is courteous and at the same time avoids complications of whether to use Mr/Ms/Miss/Mrs.



...and the leadership?

'Yours fraternally' conveys *brotherly* feeling, and is therefore inappropriate as a signing-off phrase for women. It is unfortunate that it has become one of the key trade union phrases since it so clearly excludes women.

Women could begin to use 'Yours sororally' (or sororially – both are correct and mean 'sisterly'), but perhaps it would be better to go for a phrase we can all use, such as 'Yours sincerely' or 'Yours ever'.

MEETINGS

One of the most common fears women have is speaking up at meetings. This means that their ideas and views often get overlooked, or they feel patronised by more experienced colleagues. For example,

"It's nice to hear a feminine point of view"

or

"Have the girls got anything to say for themselves?"

To make sure that women feel included and able to put their views forward, be helpful, be supportive, but don't be patronising.

We are so unused to women contributing to meetings that when they speak for 20% of the time, it feels as if they have dominated the whole proceedings.

We have got to be more aware of this unconscious prejudice.

TRADE UNION NEWSLETTERS AND MAGAZINES

NALGO's Public Service stopped its "Prettiest New Recruit" competition in 1975. NALGO has since tried to avoid blatant trivialisation of women members, but there are less obvious ways in which newsletters and

magazines can perpetuate the inferior status of women through language.

Sexist jokes or "funnies" on the subject of the dumb blonde secretary, etc. are still to be found in some branch newsletters. These should not be used in trade union literature.

Cartoons – should be checked to make sure they don't portray women in the usual stereotyped roles and don't treat women as objects of ridicule, in the same way as sexist jokes.

Photographs – make sure that women have just as much prominence as men in the overall make-up of the newsletter. So don't just take photographs of male trade unionists – and when you take pictures of women, make sure not to present them as sex objects or caricature them. Try, instead, to show them in a wide range of activities and occupations.

THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

When the mainstream press has not been pouring torrents of abuse upon "women's libbers", it has denigrated, ignored and trivialised the activities and ideas of the women's movement. Despite this, women's struggle to be treated as equal has had a considerable impact on social and economic life. Adequate coverage, and fair coverage, should be given to the movement by trade union branch newsletters and magazines, and they should provide a forum for debate on women's issues.

THINK!

When you talk or write –

Are women EXCLUDED?
TRIVIALISED?
PATRONISED?
MADE FUN OF?
TYPECAST?