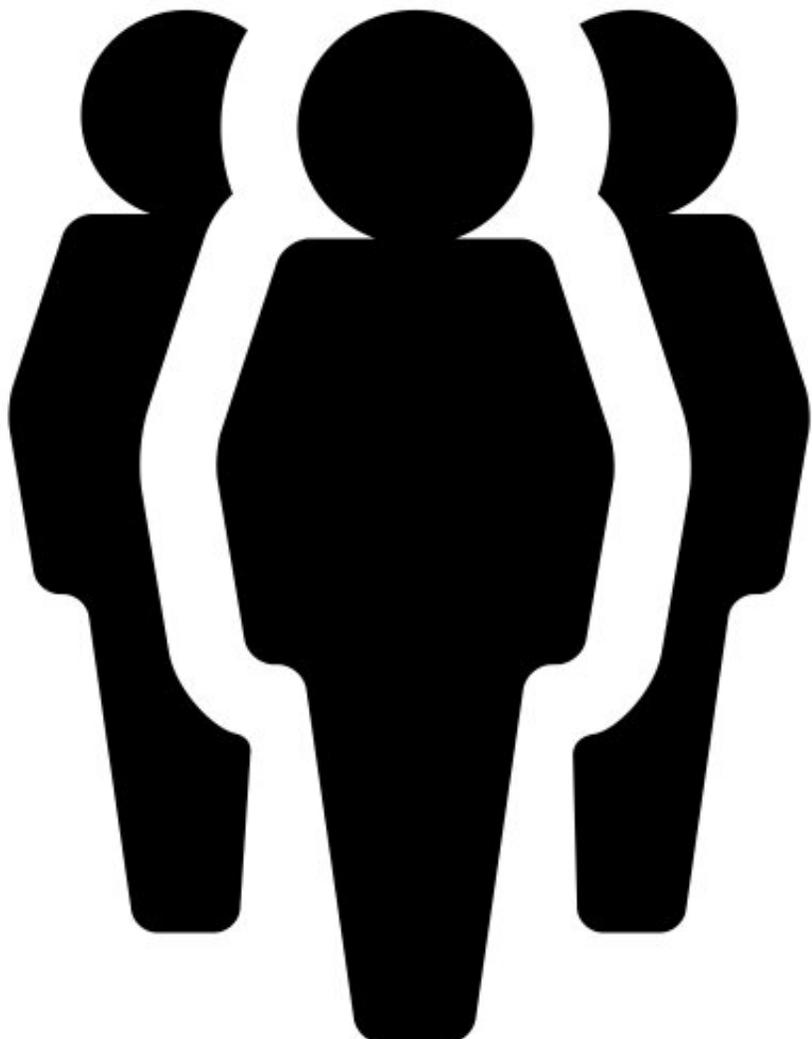


# Study suggests use of gender-neutral terms to describe people leads to gender equality

August 6 2019, by Bob Yirka

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A pair of researchers, one with Washington University in St. Louis, the other with the University of California, has found evidence that suggests the use of gender-neutral terms to describe people promotes gender equality. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Margit Tavits and Efrén Pérez describe experiments they conducted with Swedish volunteers and what they found.

Back in 2012, people in Sweden began debating adding a new word to their language to describe people in a [gender](#)-neutral fashion. The language already had the words *hon* and *han*, for he and she respectively—the word *hen* was proposed to describe people without referring to their gender. By 2015, use of the new word had become commonplace, and was added to the Swedish Academy Glossary. In this new effort, the researchers wondered if widespread use of the word in Sweden had reduced male bias in general references, thereby leading to greater gender equality. To find out, they carried out three experiments that involved writing assignments by over 3000 volunteers.

In the first experiment, volunteers looked at a picture showing an androgynous character walking a dog. Each was then asked to use the familiar *hon* or *han* or the new word, *hen*, to describe the action in the picture. In the second experiment, volunteers completed a short story about a person of unknown gender running for office. The final experiment involved soliciting volunteers' views on women and non-males in general (LGBT and non-binary people).

The researchers report that those people who used the new word, *hen*, to describe the dog-walking picture were less likely to use a male name for their character. They also found that people took the same amount of time to write the story about the person running for office regardless of the term they used to describe them. And they found that people who used the new word showed more positivity towards LGBT people. They

conclude by suggesting that the introduction of the new word into the Swedish lexicon has led to more gender-inclusive language. They further suggest that such inclusiveness could be leading to less gender bias and the promotion of gender equality.

**More information:** Margit Tavits et al. Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1908156116](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908156116)

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