

Do masculine leadership titles undermine women's leadership?

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Debates about using masculine or gender-neutral words to describe leadership positions, jobs and awards affect nearly all domains of society from business to politics and media. Recently, local politicians have

considered changing titles such as "alderman" or "councilman" to their gender-neutral counterparts (e.g., "council member"). While some dismiss calls for gender-neutral titles as mere acts of political correctness, proponents argue that masculine language is not a neutral stand-in for "person" or "leader." Instead, masculine language may undermine women's leadership by reinforcing harmful stereotypes that positions of power are reserved for men.

Allison Archer, assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston, sought to understand if masculine language has this effect. Working with Cindy Kam from Vanderbilt University, the researchers studied what happens when masculine versus gender-neutral language is used when describing leadership positions—specifically, the titles of "[chairman](#)" versus "chair." Little research had previously analyzed the role of gendered language in reinforcing gendered stereotypes, which might contribute to the persistent gender gap in leadership, according to the researchers.

Two experimental studies were conducted to understand the effect of masculine leadership titles. The work is published in *The Leadership Quarterly*. In the first study, participants read about a hypothetical "chair" or "chairman" of a paperclip company, a state legislative Ways and Means Committee, or a sociology department at a university. The researchers purposefully chose a gender-neutral name for the leader: Taylor or Pat Simmons. Respondents were told about Simmons' leadership position, age and time spent at their institution. They were also given some information about the company, committee or department. After reading this brief paragraph, individuals were asked to write, in five complete sentences, what a typical morning for Chair or Chairman Simmons might look like.

"The pronouns used in participants' sentences revealed their assumptions

about Simmons' gender. Our results first reflect the stereotype that leadership positions belong to men: when reading about Chair Simmons, a little more than half of respondents assumed the leader was a man even though Simmons' gender was not specified," said Archer.

When reading about Chairman Simmons, study participants became more likely to assume the leader was a man than in the chair condition. "The results suggest masculine language further accentuates stereotypes that men hold leadership positions," she added.

In the real world, unlike in the first experiment, the gender of a leader who uses a masculine leadership title is typically known. The second study looked at what happens when people know the gender of a leader who goes by either "chairman" or "chair." Study participants read a brief paragraph discussing a new leader of a state legislature's Ways and Means Committee. The leader in the vignette was either referred to as a "chair" or "chairman" and was either named Joan or John Davenport. Here, the gender of the leader was perfectly clear from Davenport's first name and the pronouns used to refer to Davenport. After reading the paragraph, participants shared their opinions about the leader and then were asked to recall the name of the new leader. They could choose between John, Joan, Joseph, Josie and Don't Know.

"In yet another demonstration of the power of gendered language and unconscious stereotypes, we found masculine titles affect recollections of women and men leaders differently," said Kam.

The title "chairman" increased the accuracy of recall for male leaders yet undermined the accuracy of recall for [women leaders](#): a woman who goes by "chairman" is less likely to be correctly remembered compared to a man who does the same. A woman who goes by "chairman" is more likely to have her leadership wrongly ascribed to a man.

In both studies, the researchers tested for but did not uncover any evidence that the participants' own gender made a difference: women participants were no less susceptible to the effects of masculine titles than men participants. This could be because gender stereotypes are transmitted and learned at the societal level (through television, books, and other forms of socialization) and can be applied unconsciously and unintentionally.

"Overall, we found that masculine leadership titles really do matter—they affect assumptions about and recollections of leaders' gender. Titles like 'chairman' increase people's assumptions that men are in leadership positions and decrease recollections that women hold such positions of power," said Archer. "This suggests [gender](#)-neutral and masculine leadership titles are not just synonyms for each other. Masculine leadership titles reinforce stereotypes that tie men to leadership and undermine the connection between women and [leadership](#)."

More information: Allison M.N. Archer et al, She is the chair(man): Gender, language, and leadership, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101610](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101610)

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