
Can Words Be Misogynistic?

-Sonali Kayal

Language is one of the most ordinary parts of everyday life. We use it constantly to communicate, express opinions, share emotions, and understand the world around us. Because speaking is such a routine activity, people rarely stop to think about the deeper meanings hidden within the words and expressions they use. Many phrases become so familiar through repetition that they are accepted without question. Yet language does much more than simply describe reality. It reflects cultural values, social norms, and collective beliefs that have developed over generations. Sometimes these beliefs promote equality and respect, but at other times they quietly preserve stereotypes that people no longer consciously recognize. This makes language not only a mirror of society but also one of its most powerful teachers.

On an everyday basis, countless women hear lines like:

“Aurat ki akal ghutne mein hoti hai.”

“Ladki paraya dhan hoti hai.”

“Don’t cry like a girl.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

Have you ever heard these lines around you? Well, there is almost no chance you have not. Maybe from relatives during family gatherings, maybe in schools, films, casual conversations, or even in jokes people laugh at without thinking twice. These phrases are so normalized that nobody really pauses to question what they are actually teaching.

What makes these expressions particularly significant is not merely their existence but the ease with which they are spoken. They are rarely intended as deliberate insults, nor are they usually questioned by those who repeat them. Instead, they are presented as jokes, pieces of advice, traditional wisdom, or harmless observations. Because they appear so ordinary, their underlying assumptions often remain invisible. Over time, repeated exposure to such expressions gradually shapes the way people think about gender, influencing what is considered normal, acceptable, or expected from women and men.

Recently, while reading *Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Lakoff, I came across a line that stayed with me: *“Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings.”* And honestly, after reading that, I started observing more closely how silently we consume misogyny through everyday language without even realizing it.

For instance, phrases like “don’t cry like a girl” directly link femininity with weakness, while expressions like “be a man” connect masculinity with emotional suppression. Both shape how emotional behaviour is judged differently based on gender.

These examples demonstrate that language often performs a role beyond communication. It silently establishes expectations about how individuals should behave, express emotions, and interact with others according to their gender. Since such expressions are repeated throughout childhood and adulthood, they gradually become accepted as common sense rather than cultural assumptions. As a result, people frequently internalise these ideas without recognising that they are rooted in long-standing social stereotypes rather than objective truths.

Language is not only a tool for communication. It also carries social beliefs and attitudes that are often hidden within everyday speech. This means that what we say is never completely neutral; it reflects how society thinks and what it considers normal. Linguists have long argued that language both reflects society and contributes to shaping it. Every culture develops expressions that preserve its beliefs, traditions, and social values. These expressions are transmitted through families, schools, literature, films, and everyday conversations, allowing cultural attitudes to persist across generations. Children, in particular, begin learning social expectations through language long before they possess the ability to question them critically. Consequently, language becomes one of the earliest ways through which ideas about gender, authority, behaviour, and identity are communicated and normalised.

India proudly celebrates its linguistic and cultural diversity, but what often goes unnoticed is how deeply gender bias is embedded within everyday language itself. Across many regional languages, there are countless proverbs, idioms, and casual expressions that repeatedly associate women with irrationality, emotional instability, weakness, silence, or dependence. These expressions are rarely questioned because they are often treated as humor, tradition, or part of normal conversation. Since they are passed down through generations, people tend to accept them without reflection, which allows biased ideas to remain unnoticed. A common example is how a confident woman speaking firmly is often described as “too much” or “rude,” while similar behaviour in men is seen as leadership or authority. This difference in interpretation shows how deeply language shapes perception.

The diversity of Indian languages means that these stereotypes appear in numerous cultural forms. Proverbs, folk songs, nursery rhymes, marriage rituals, and everyday advice often communicate remarkably similar expectations about women's behaviour despite linguistic differences. Girls are frequently encouraged to remain modest, obedient, patient, and self-sacrificing, while boys are expected to display confidence, independence, and strength. Because these messages are repeatedly reinforced by family members and respected elders, they gradually become accepted as cultural wisdom rather than gendered assumptions.

What is interesting is that most of these phrases are not even spoken with deliberate hatred. They are repeated as humor, advice, tradition, or simply as part of “normal conversation.” The most disturbing part is not simply that these expressions exist. It is how comfortably they survive in everyday life. Nobody questions them because society has heard them for generations.

That is exactly how linguistic misogyny works. Not loudly, but subtly. Hidden inside proverbs, jokes, family advice, films, and ordinary conversations until prejudice becomes so familiar that people stop recognizing it as prejudice at all. The subtle nature of linguistic misogyny is precisely

what allows it to survive. Unlike explicit discrimination, it rarely appears aggressive or intentionally harmful. Instead, it becomes embedded within familiar expressions that people repeat automatically. Since these phrases are heard from parents, teachers, friends, films, and media personalities, they acquire a sense of legitimacy through repetition. Over time, familiarity replaces critical reflection, allowing prejudice to continue under the appearance of ordinary conversation.

This connects to the idea that language can shape thought. When certain words and associations are repeated again and again, they begin to influence how people perceive reality. Over time, these repeated patterns turn into automatic beliefs about gender roles.

Linguistic misogyny refers to the ways in which language carries and spreads negative ideas about women. It is not always direct or openly offensive. Instead, it often appears in everyday speech, sayings, jokes, and expressions that seem normal but quietly reflect gender bias. For example, sayings that suggest “girls are emotional” or “boys don’t cry” influence how emotional expression is judged differently, making emotional sensitivity seem natural for women and unacceptable for men. This form of bias is usually indirect, which is why it is difficult to identify. Unlike direct discrimination, it does not always appear harmful on the surface, but its effect becomes visible through repetition and social acceptance.

Unlike explicit verbal abuse, linguistic misogyny often operates through subtle linguistic choices that appear ordinary in daily life. These may include jokes, metaphors, idioms, compliments, labels, or casual remarks that repeatedly associate women with emotionality, dependence, beauty, or domestic responsibilities while portraying men as rational, ambitious, and authoritative. Individually, such expressions may seem insignificant. However, their continuous repetition across different social settings gradually reinforces unequal assumptions about gender roles.

The idea is closely linked to the work of linguist Robin Lakoff, who studied the relationship between language and gender. In her work *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975), she pointed out that language is not neutral. According to her, the way people speak reflects deeper social attitudes, including inequality between men and women. Lakoff’s work represented one of the earliest systematic attempts to examine the relationship between language and gender inequality. She argued that women’s speech was often characterised by greater politeness, hesitation, tag questions, and indirectness, not because these qualities were biologically determined but because society expected women to appear less assertive than men. According to Lakoff, linguistic behaviour reflects unequal power relations rather than natural differences between the sexes. Her work encouraged scholars to examine everyday communication as an important site where social inequality is both reflected and reproduced, making it one of the foundational texts in feminist linguistics.

Many studies have supported this idea. Research in sociolinguistics has shown that gender bias is often embedded in everyday language, including common expressions, idioms, and patterns of speech. Rather than simply reflecting social attitudes, these linguistic patterns can also reinforce and normalize them.

A 2020 study by Molly Lewis and Gary Lupyan, published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, provides strong evidence for this. The researchers analyzed 25 languages and compared their findings with

the responses of more than 650,000 participants. They discovered that the gender stereotypes embedded in language closely matched people's unconscious beliefs about men and women. For example, men were more strongly associated with leadership, authority, and careers, while women were more often linked with caregiving and domestic roles.

Similar conclusions have emerged from research on children's language acquisition and gender socialisation. Studies suggest that children begin absorbing gender stereotypes through everyday language long before they fully understand broader social structures. Parents, teachers, peers, storybooks, cartoons, and classroom interactions all contribute to shaping children's understanding of what is considered appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. Consequently, language becomes one of the earliest mechanisms through which gender expectations are learned and internalised.

Some may argue that such expressions are simply traditional or not meant to cause harm. However, even when there is no intention to offend, repeated exposure to biased language still reinforces stereotypes and shapes collective thinking. Similar findings have emerged from studies on proverbs and traditional sayings across different cultures. Researchers have found that these expressions frequently portray women as emotional, dependent, or passive, while men are depicted as strong, rational, and authoritative. Repeated over generations, such language quietly reinforces unequal gender roles and makes these stereotypes appear natural.

In workplaces and classrooms, this bias becomes visible when a confident woman is labelled “bossy” or “aggressive,” while a man with the same behaviour is called “assertive” or “a natural leader.” This shows how linguistic patterns extend into real-life judgment.

Linguistic Misogyny Beyond Everyday Conversations

Although casual conversations provide some of the clearest examples of linguistic misogyny, gendered language extends far beyond everyday interactions. Public forms of communication, including films, advertisements, news media, political discourse, and digital platforms, play an equally significant role in shaping how society understands women and gender roles. Since these forms of communication reach large audiences and are consumed repeatedly, the language they employ often becomes an important source through which stereotypes are reinforced and normalised. Unlike private conversations, public communication possesses the power to influence collective attitudes on a much larger scale, making its linguistic choices particularly significant.

Films, for instance, have long contributed to the normalisation of gendered language. Female characters are frequently introduced or described through their appearance, relationships, or emotional qualities, whereas male characters are more often associated with ambition, intelligence, courage, or authority. Dialogues portraying women as overly emotional, irrational, or dependent are often presented as humour or accepted social behaviour rather than prejudice. Expressions suggesting that women are naturally difficult to understand, excessively talkative, or incapable of making rational decisions have become recurring features of popular cinema. Because such portrayals are repeated across generations of films, audiences often absorb these assumptions without consciously recognising them as gender stereotypes.

Advertising similarly relies on linguistic patterns that reinforce traditional gender expectations. Commercials promoting household products frequently present women as naturally responsible for

cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other domestic responsibilities, while men are portrayed as decision-makers, professionals, or financial providers. Even when advertisements appear progressive, their language often continues to associate women with beauty, care, and emotional sensitivity rather than competence or leadership. Since advertising seeks to communicate familiar ideas quickly, it often depends on existing social stereotypes, allowing biased assumptions to remain largely unquestioned.

The influence of linguistic misogyny is also visible in news reporting and political discourse. The language used to describe women in positions of authority often differs noticeably from that used for men holding similar roles. Media reports are more likely to comment on a woman's appearance, clothing, family life, or emotional reactions, whereas coverage of male leaders generally focuses on their decisions, experience, or political achievements. Similarly, women expressing confidence or strong opinions in political debates are frequently described as "aggressive," "emotional," or "confrontational," while men demonstrating comparable behaviour are more often characterised as "decisive," "assertive," or "strong leaders." These differences in linguistic representation subtly influence public perceptions of leadership and authority, reinforcing the belief that confidence is a desirable quality in men but an undesirable one in women.

The growth of digital communication has further expanded the reach of linguistic misogyny. Social media platforms have transformed the way language is created, shared, and repeated. Memes, comment sections, short videos, and viral trends often circulate gendered expressions at remarkable speed, allowing stereotypes to reach millions of users within a matter of hours. While many online communities actively challenge sexist language and promote gender equality, digital spaces also provide opportunities for misogynistic expressions to spread under the guise of humour, satire, or entertainment. Because online communication encourages repetition and imitation, harmful phrases are often normalised before their underlying assumptions are critically examined.

What connects all these forms of communication is not simply the presence of isolated sexist expressions but the consistency with which similar ideas are repeated across different platforms. Whether encountered in a family conversation, a film dialogue, an advertisement, a news headline, or a social media post, these linguistic patterns repeatedly associate women with particular characteristics while assigning different expectations to men. Their cumulative effect extends beyond individual words, gradually shaping public attitudes, influencing social behaviour, and reinforcing unequal gender norms. This demonstrates that linguistic misogyny is not confined to personal speech but forms part of a broader communicative environment that continually influences how gender is understood within society.

The persistence of linguistic misogyny can also be explained by its mode of transmission. Unlike explicit discrimination, it often operates through humor, tradition, and everyday speech. Because of this, it is frequently dismissed as harmless or culturally rooted. Attempts to question such language are sometimes met with resistance or seen as unnecessary sensitivity, which further contributes to its survival. Humor and tradition often act as protective layers for biased language. When something is framed as a joke or cultural habit, it becomes less likely to be challenged. This allows harmful ideas to continue without being critically examined. The rapid growth of digital communication has further expanded the reach of linguistic misogyny. Expressions that once circulated mainly within

families or local communities are now shared instantly through memes, comments, short videos, and online discussions. While social media has created opportunities to challenge sexist language, it has also enabled harmful stereotypes to spread more rapidly than ever before. The speed and accessibility of digital platforms make critical awareness of language increasingly important in contemporary society.

The impact of such language extends far beyond words. Language shapes the way people think, perceive others, and understand their place in society. When gender-biased expressions are repeated throughout childhood and adulthood, they gradually become accepted as unquestionable truths rather than harmful stereotypes. Girls grow up constantly hearing messages that associate them with weakness, emotionality, or dependence, while boys are repeatedly exposed to ideas that link masculinity with strength, authority, and leadership. Over time, these repeated messages influence attitudes, expectations, and behaviour.

The consequences are visible in everyday life. Gender stereotypes embedded in language affect how women are treated in homes, classrooms, workplaces, and public spaces. A woman who expresses confidence is often labelled "bossy" or "aggressive," while a man displaying the same qualities is praised as a strong leader. Women's opinions are frequently dismissed as emotional rather than rational, not because of evidence, but because language has long normalized these assumptions. What begins as a casual phrase eventually shapes social attitudes and reinforces unequal power structures.

The Wider Consequences of Linguistic Misogyny

The influence of linguistic misogyny extends beyond individual conversations and gradually becomes visible in broader social structures. Because language shapes expectations, repeated gendered expressions often influence how people evaluate competence, authority, and behaviour in everyday situations. What begins as an apparently harmless phrase eventually contributes to unequal opportunities and unequal treatment. Since these assumptions are reinforced over long periods of time, they frequently become difficult to distinguish from objective reality. As a result, gender stereotypes are not only reflected through language but also reproduced through social institutions and interpersonal relationships.

In educational settings, linguistic stereotypes often influence children's understanding of their own abilities and potential. Teachers and parents may unintentionally use different forms of encouragement when interacting with boys and girls. Boys are more likely to be praised for confidence, independence, and leadership, while girls are frequently appreciated for being polite, helpful, obedient, or well-behaved. Although these comments appear positive, they communicate different expectations regarding acceptable behaviour. Over time, girls may become less willing to express disagreement, take intellectual risks, or assume leadership roles, not because they lack ability, but because they have repeatedly learned that confidence is less socially acceptable for them. In this way, language contributes to shaping educational experiences long before students begin making important academic or career decisions.

The effects continue into professional life, where communication often influences perceptions of competence and authority. Women occupying leadership positions frequently experience greater

scrutiny regarding the way they speak, express disagreement, or make decisions. Characteristics that are interpreted as confidence or decisiveness in men are sometimes described as aggression or emotionality when demonstrated by women. Such differences in linguistic evaluation affect hiring decisions, performance reviews, promotions, and workplace interactions. Even when organisations attempt to promote gender equality, unconscious linguistic biases may continue influencing professional judgement because the underlying stereotypes remain embedded within everyday communication.

The psychological consequences of linguistic misogyny should not be overlooked. Language influences not only how people perceive others but also how individuals understand themselves. Constant exposure to expressions that associate women with weakness, emotional instability, or dependence may gradually affect confidence, aspirations, and self-perception. This process, often described as the internalisation of social stereotypes, occurs when individuals begin accepting repeated social messages as accurate descriptions of themselves. In many cases, women may unconsciously limit their own ambitions or hesitate to express their opinions because they have repeatedly encountered language suggesting that such behaviour is inappropriate or undesirable. At the same time, men may also experience pressure to suppress vulnerability or emotional expression because linguistic expectations associate masculinity with strength and emotional restraint. Consequently, linguistic misogyny reinforces restrictive gender roles that affect everyone, although its consequences continue to fall disproportionately upon women.

These effects demonstrate that linguistic misogyny is not merely a matter of offensive expressions or outdated proverbs. Its significance lies in its cumulative influence over time. Individual words may appear insignificant when considered in isolation, yet their repeated use across families, educational institutions, workplaces, media, and public discourse gradually shapes social expectations that influence behaviour, opportunities, and relationships. Recognising this broader impact allows linguistic misogyny to be understood not simply as a problem of language but as an important factor contributing to the persistence of gender inequality within society.

This raises an important question: if language has the power to sustain inequality, can it also become a tool for change?

Can Language Become a Tool for Social Change?

If language contributes to the formation and preservation of gender stereotypes, it also possesses the capacity to challenge them. Throughout history, language has continuously evolved alongside social change. Expressions that were once widely accepted have gradually disappeared as societies began questioning the values they represented. This demonstrates that language is neither fixed nor immune to change. Instead, it develops alongside cultural attitudes, reflecting shifts in public awareness and social values. Consequently, addressing linguistic misogyny does not require abandoning language or cultural traditions; rather, it requires critically examining the assumptions embedded within everyday expressions.

Meaningful change begins with awareness. Many people repeat gendered expressions without recognising their implications because these phrases have been normalised over generations. Developing awareness encourages individuals to pause and consider the messages their words

communicate beyond their immediate meaning. Asking simple questions such as why particular expressions exist, whose interests they serve, and what assumptions they reinforce can gradually transform the way language is understood. Critical reflection does not restrict communication; instead, it enables communication to become more thoughtful and inclusive.

Educational institutions have an especially important role to play in this process. Schools and universities influence not only academic knowledge but also social attitudes. Literature, classroom discussions, language teaching, and critical thinking activities provide valuable opportunities for students to recognise stereotypes embedded within everyday speech. Encouraging learners to analyse proverbs, advertisements, media representations, and popular expressions enables them to understand how language contributes to broader social inequalities. Such educational practices help develop linguistic awareness rather than simply teaching grammatical correctness.

The media also bears considerable responsibility because it shapes public discourse on a daily basis. Journalists, filmmakers, advertisers, and content creators influence how millions of people perceive gender through the words they choose and the narratives they construct. More balanced and inclusive forms of representation can gradually challenge stereotypes that have long been accepted as normal. Similarly, social media platforms, despite often contributing to the spread of harmful language, also provide spaces where discriminatory expressions can be questioned, discussed, and challenged by diverse communities. Public conversations surrounding inclusive language demonstrate that linguistic change often begins with ordinary people choosing to communicate differently.

At the individual level, change begins through everyday interactions. Parents influence children's earliest understanding of gender through ordinary conversations at home. Teachers shape classroom expectations through the language they use with students. Friends reinforce or challenge stereotypes through humour, compliments, and casual remarks. These daily interactions may appear insignificant when viewed separately, yet together they contribute to broader cultural attitudes. Choosing more inclusive language does not mean monitoring every sentence with excessive caution. Rather, it involves recognising that words possess consequences beyond immediate communication and that seemingly ordinary expressions can either reinforce prejudice or encourage equality.

Ultimately, changing language alone cannot eliminate gender inequality. Social, political, economic, and institutional reforms remain essential for achieving meaningful equality. Nevertheless, language continues to influence how these broader structures are understood and experienced. Since language shapes perception, perception shapes behaviour, and behaviour contributes to social change. Becoming more conscious of everyday communication therefore represents not a complete solution but an important step towards creating a society in which equality is reflected not only in laws and policies but also in the ordinary conversations through which people understand one another.

The answer is yes, but only if people begin to question the words they have accepted without reflection. Challenging linguistic misogyny does not mean policing every conversation or abandoning cultural traditions. It means recognizing that language is never innocent when it repeatedly devalues one section of society. Expressions that demean women should no longer be

excused as harmless jokes, age-old wisdom, or cultural habits. Normalization cannot be used as a defence for prejudice.

The discussion throughout this article demonstrates that linguistic misogyny is not confined to openly offensive remarks or deliberate acts of discrimination. More often, it exists within ordinary words, familiar sayings, casual jokes, traditional advice, and everyday conversations that most people rarely stop to question. Because these expressions are repeated across generations and reinforced through families, educational institutions, media, workplaces, and digital communication, they gradually become accepted as common sense rather than cultural assumptions. Their persistence illustrates that language is never merely a neutral system of communication. It carries beliefs, values, and social expectations that quietly influence how individuals perceive themselves and others.

One of the greatest challenges in recognising linguistic misogyny is its subtlety. Unlike explicit prejudice, it often appears harmless because it is embedded within expressions that have become culturally familiar. Many people repeat such phrases without intending to insult or discriminate against women. Nevertheless, intention alone cannot determine the social impact of language. Expressions that repeatedly associate women with weakness, emotionality, dependence, or silence continue to reinforce unequal gender expectations regardless of whether speakers consciously recognise their implications. The normalisation of these expressions demonstrates that prejudice does not always survive through hostility. It often survives through habit.

Language is constantly evolving, and so are societies. The same language that has preserved stereotypes for generations can also become a powerful means of promoting equality, dignity, and respect. Real social change does not begin only with laws or policies. It also begins with everyday conversations. If we want to build a society that truly believes in gender equality, then we must first become conscious of the words we choose and the ideas they continue to carry.

Meaningful change begins with awareness. The words people choose every day influence not only conversations but also expectations, relationships, and social behaviour. Parents shape children's earliest understanding of gender through ordinary family interactions. Teachers influence students through classroom communication and feedback. Journalists, filmmakers, advertisers, and content creators shape public attitudes through the language they use to represent women and men. Friends reinforce or challenge stereotypes through humour, compliments, and casual remarks. Each of these interactions may appear insignificant when viewed individually, yet together they contribute to the broader linguistic environment in which social beliefs are formed. Becoming more conscious of language therefore represents an important step towards creating a society where equality is reflected not only in laws and policies but also in everyday communication.

Perhaps the most important lesson emerging from this discussion is that linguistic misogyny is not sustained because people deliberately choose inequality every time they speak. Instead, it persists because familiar expressions are repeated so frequently that they cease to appear ideological. When prejudice becomes embedded within ordinary language, it becomes remarkably difficult to recognise. This is precisely why critical reflection matters. Questioning familiar expressions does not require individuals to monitor every sentence they speak, nor does it demand abandoning

cultural identity. Rather, it encourages people to become more attentive to the assumptions their words continue to reproduce.

Perhaps the next time someone casually says, "*Aurat ki akal ghutne mein hoti hai*," "*Ladki paraya dhan hoti hai*," or dismisses someone's emotions with the phrase "*Don't cry like a girl*," the conversation should no longer end with laughter or unquestioning acceptance. Instead, it should prompt us to ask why such expressions have survived for generations, what assumptions they continue to reinforce, and whether they still have a place in a society that increasingly values equality and inclusion. These are not merely isolated sayings or harmless fragments of tradition. They are part of a larger linguistic system through which stereotypes are preserved, repeated, and gradually accepted as common sense.

The purpose of questioning such language is not to reject cultural traditions or police everyday conversations. Rather, it is to recognise that language carries consequences beyond its immediate meaning. Every word reflects a way of seeing the world, and every repeated expression has the potential to influence how individuals understand themselves and others. When gender-biased language goes unquestioned, it quietly reinforces unequal expectations and limits the possibilities available to both women and men. Conversely, when people become more conscious of the words they choose, language can begin to challenge rather than preserve inequality.

Ultimately, meaningful social change does not begin only through legislation, institutional reforms, or public campaigns. It also begins in the ordinary conversations that shape everyday life. Language has never been merely a collection of words; it is a reflection of society's values, beliefs, and assumptions. If repetition has the power to transform prejudice into accepted belief, then conscious reflection has the power to transform language into a force for equality, dignity, and respect. The responsibility, therefore, lies not only in changing the way we speak, but also in changing the way we listen, question, and think.

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