

# Sexism in the vietnamese language and its relation to gender role

[Sociology](#), [Social Issues](#)



The notion of gender role – the social role that covers a range of behavior considered appropriate for people based on their sex – gives rise to sexism in language – the use of language that discriminates against members of a certain gender. In Vietnam, the assigned role for men and women gradually forms stereotypes and prejudice against both sexes. These stereotypes have taken roots in the mind of many Vietnamese people and are reflected in their lexical choice and conversational implicature. In many cultures including Vietnamese, men are supposed to develop traits of masculinity, such as strength, courage, independence and assertiveness, while women are supposed to develop traits of femininity, such as gentleness, tolerance, empathy and sensitivity. Additionally, men are expected to lead a successful career, achieve a social status and earn money to feed the family while women are expected to deal with household chores and submit to their husband. The idea about gender role creates conventional images of the sexes and forces both men and women to adjust their behavior to meet social norms, which can further strengthen themselves: People tend to hold the same belief and share the same behavior with the majority of others and consider these commonalities a standard, giving rise to even more stereotyping that leads to sexism. Sexism in language can affect both genders; however, its primary victims are women and Vietnamese is no exception.

First and foremost, sexism is reflected in lexical choice. Vietnamese women from every social class and every time period are addressed based on their husband's name or position. In Vietnamese, “ông” and “bà” are titles used before names to refer to men and women respectively. During colonial

times, the word “ bà hội đồng” referred to the woman whose husband was in charge of an administrative unit – “ ông hội đồng”. The same went to “ bà cai lệ”, whose husband was in command of the guards in a feudal district – “ ông cai lệ” and “ bà nghề”, whose husband – “ ông nghề” – was someone that held a specific academic position. These practices of addressing women can still be seen in today’s society, although not as profound. There are two ways to interpret the following word: “ bà chủ tịch” –the woman who is a president herself or the wife of a president – “ ông chủ tịch”.

Authors adopted common ways of addressing women to female characters. “ Tắt đèn” by Ngô Tất Tố revolves around the tragic life of an impoverished woman known as “ Dậu”. However, her real name was “ Đào” and “ Dậu” was her husband’s name. “ Đào” appeared for a few times before “ Dậu” took over as the main reference for the woman. The name of the husband is also used to refer to married couples as a whole. In the same work, the antagonists were addressed as “ vợ chồng Nghị Quế”, in which “ Nghị Quế” was the husband’s name. In “ Hạnh phúc của một tang gia” by Vũ Trọng Phụng, a wealthy married couple was called “ ông bà Văn Minh”, in which “ Văn Minh” was the husband’s name. The wife was accordingly called “ bà Văn Minh”. Household chores are called “ công việc nội trợ” in Vietnamese. If you are a Vietnamese, chances are that you have heard the phrase “ bà nội trợ” but never something like “ ông nội trợ”. This stems from the conventional image of a woman: staying at home full-time and dealing with household problems. Because of this, women are impeded from developing skills while men are not allowed to stay at home full-time and do housework.

If he does, he will be regarded as incompetent, unambitious and may be spitefully called “ Đố đàn bà!” (You woman!) for that is supposedly a woman’s job. The occupational range of women is limited not because of their inability but because of the conventional image of a woman that is deep-seated in people’s mind.

Vietnamese has another pair of words - “ trai” and “ gái” -to refer to men and women respectively. However, there is a striking difference between their meanings in some circumstances. The literal meanings of the following collocations display symmetry in terms of gender, from which a disparity in presupposed meaning comes in. If you key the word “ làm trai” (literal meaning: being men) into any search engine, the first results will be about “ chí làm trai” (a set of characteristics a man has to possess: resilience, ambitiousness, nobility of mind, aspiration for goodness...). On the other hand, if you do the same with “ làm gái” (literal meaning: being women) you will get results about prostitution. The names for professions in Vietnamese are gender-neutral, which means they can be applied to both sexes.

However, people associate some of them only with men and add the prefix “ nữ” to refer to a woman working in these professions. Words such as “ kiến trúc sư” (architect), “ kỹ sư” (engineer), “ giám đốc” (director), “ chính trị gia” (politician) conjure up the image of a man, not a woman. The addition of the prefix “ nữ” is similar to stating that these occupations are exclusive to men and that if a woman joins in, she is considered an unusual case and it is necessary to distinguish her from male colleagues. This can be partly due to

the fact that these are male-dominated occupations but through time the mental image they carry will exclude women from participation.

Secondly, sexism is not only reflected in lexical choice but also in conversations. The question “ What does her husband do?” is often used to ask about a woman, which conveys the belief that a woman’s value lies in her husband and that she is dependent on him. A woman is not assessed on her own ability but on her husband. However, if she surpasses her husband in some areas, typically income or education, the husband will be looked down on, just like a man staying at home full-time to do housework. In Vietnamese, reprimand can carry a sexist implicature. Utterances such as “ Con trai gì mà nhát như con gái” (How can you be as cowardly as a girl?) or “ Con gái gì mà hung dữ như con trai” (How can you be as fierce as a guy?) are likely to occur when members from a certain gender fail to comply with their gender role or exhibit traits considered exclusive to the opposite gender. Here, “ cowardly” is associated with women and “ fierce” is associated with men. There are different words to refer to people from different genders but only those of women are used in insult and humiliation. Women appear much more frequently in derogatory sentences, a typical one being “ Đồ đàn bà!” (You woman!). Anyone who receives this sentence is viewed as cowardly, selfish or narrow-minded regardless of sex, which conveys a prejudice that these awful characteristics are exclusive to women. The word “ đàn bà” itself carries a negative connotation. An expression like “ Đồ đàn ông!” (You man!) never exists as the word “ đàn ông” is neutral and may even carry a sense of maturity while “ đàn bà” is used more or less with

a contemptuous attitude. Moreover, sexism can be found in Vietnamese folk verses – ca dao – as they are a representation of the real world and reflect believes people have about the world. There is a wealth of Vietnamese folk verses that assign responsibility to both sexes, but the constraints are harsher on women. They are valued based on their motherhood. “ Gái có con như bồ hòn có rễ – Gái không con như bè trôi sông” (A woman with children is a rooted sapindale – A woman with none is a drifted raft) and “ Cây độc không trái, gái độc không con” (Noxious trees have no fruits – Noxious women have no children) imply that a woman is only secure and decent when she has children. “ Con hư tại mẹ, cháu hư tại bà” (A spoiled child is the mother’s fault – A spoiled grandchild is the grandmother’s fault) – if a child is ill-bred, the women in the family are to blame. They also have to sacrifice for their husband: “ Lấy chồng thì phải theo chồng – Chồng đi hang rắn hang rồng cũng theo” (If you are married, you have to follow your husband, whether he goes into snake or dragon caves). There is subtle implication about a woman’s job: “ Áo anh sút chỉ đường tà – Vợ anh chưa có, mẹ già chưa khâu” (My shirt is unstitched – I haven’t had a wife, my mother hasn’t fixed it yet). Some verses contain devaluation of the women as in “ Chàng ơi phụ thiếp mà chi – Thiếp như cơm nguội đỡ khi đói lòng” (Please don’t turn your back on me – I’m the cold rice in case you are hungry). “ Chồng giận thì vợ bớt lời – Cơm sôi nhỏ lửa mấy đời cơm khê” (If the husband is angry the wife has to speak less – The boiling rice needs lower fire) – the wife has to maintain the harmony of the family by submitting to her husband. The verses share one implication: the more submission women devote to their husbands, the more they are valued. As they were passed on

to our generation and remain as a cultural heritage, they gradually and subconsciously form a set of standards that applies to women. Therefore, women still face discrimination on the basis of gender in today's society.

Overall, sexism in Vietnamese arises from what people believe men and women should do in order to conform to gender role - a set of characteristics and responsibilities assigned to members of a specific gender. Although sexism affects both of the sexes, it is more directed at women. Sexism can be found in everyday use of the Vietnamese language and is therefore still deep-rooted in people's mind.