

Dear Sirs, Happy International Women's Day

Archaic

Every day I receive correspondence addressed to me as “Dear Sir/s”. This male address is an accepted standard which is still used by law firms, the court service and barristers’ chambers.

To me this greeting is a relic of a time when women and those identifying as female were a minority within the legal field and, at worst, not welcome within it. Women are no longer a marginal group in this profession thus it should follow that the practice of assuming male identity as a default is no longer appropriate.

What we should be doing is using a person’s preferred gender pronoun, or a gender-neutral alternative. In doing so we acknowledge a person’s identity, are respectful, inclusive and courteous.

Why Change?

We have to think about the language we use as it reveals the assumptions and decisions being made. “Dear Sirs” makes the assumption that the recipient is a male, and again, fails to give regard to the actual recipient. Using this address when you know the recipient, could be seen as a micro-aggression if you are on opposing sides, it can also signal regression and laziness to properly address the recipient.

The lady Judge who presided over my matter this morning told me that she is constantly referred to as ‘he’ when her Judgments are quoted. Surely, we are passed the belief that there is no place for female Judges and practitioners in our midst? If we have, then why are we failing to properly address women when it comes to such basic issues of correspondence?

Taking the time to amend standard letters and legal precedents in contracts, leases and court orders shows courtesy, gender equality and takes into account our duty not to discriminate.

The BSB Handbooks lists ‘*You must not discriminate unlawfully against any person*’ as a core duty and also, tells us to treat each client with courtesy and consideration, which must also apply to colleagues, opposing lawyers and everyone in general.



Change Matters

The legal profession is well aware that language, communication and words matter. If we want an inclusive profession but continue to use language that is gendered we will continue to exclude a large part of the profession.

Changing language is often a precursor to larger, systemic changes and further steps to purging this profession of sexual harassment, gender bias and under representation of women at senior levels such as heads of chambers, benchers, within committees, law firm partners and within the judiciary.

It is time to ditch Debretts, break the bias and start using a person's preferred gender pronoun, or a gender-neutral alternative. In doing so we acknowledge a person's identity, are respectful, inclusive, courteous and not discriminatory.

So then what should we use instead, well, if in doubt, just ask!

Shabinah Ladha

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