

**Fair Representation of the Genders in French:
Gender-inclusive Writing at Status of Women Canada**

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1. Preamble

Status of Women Canada is a federal government agency working to promote gender equality and ensuring the full participation of women in Canada's economic, social, cultural and political life.

To promote equality, it is not enough to pass legislation or establish affirmative-action policies; attitudes and culture must change. In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women noted "the easy generalizations...of the concept of womanhood, that fill so much of the literature, thought and even languages of western countries"¹, and language is the primary carrier of culture. Hence the importance of ensuring that women are fairly depicted in writing, especially in a language like French, which indicates gender.

2. Definitions

<i>gender-inclusive</i>	Describes a writing technique or text that equitably highlights the presence of women and men. That presence is expressed through the use of words that refer to women and men alike (i.e. through neutral constructions) or that specifically talk about both women and men (i.e. through syntactical feminization) ² .
<i>lexical feminization</i>	A process where a masculine noun or title is converted to feminine. Thus, <i>rédacteur</i> [male writer] becomes <i>rédactrice</i> [female writer], <i>agent financier supérieur</i> [senior financial officer (male)] becomes <i>agente financière supérieure</i> [senior financial officer (female)] etc.
<i>syntactical feminization</i>	A writing process where women and men are specifically mentioned, mainly through the use of doublets in the sentences (e.g. <i>Le gouvernement souhaite consulter les citoyennes et citoyens</i> [the government wants to consult with male citizens and female citizens]).
<i>generic</i>	Said of a word that indicates a class of beings or objects each of which can be referred to by a specific noun, e.g. a <i>cours d'eau</i> [watercourse] (<i>rivière, fleuve</i> , etc. [different sizes of rivers]) or a <i>personne</i> [person] (man or woman).

¹ *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, Ottawa, 1970, chap. 1 [on line at http://www.acswccf.nb.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=400&Itemid=58&lang=en].

² According to *Avoir bon genre à l'écrit : guide de rédaction épiciène* by Pierrette Vachon-L'Heureux and Louise Guénette, Office québécois de la langue française, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 2006.

gender The word refers to two separate concepts:
 a) a noun's grammatical category (feminine or masculine);
 b) a person's "*sexe social*"³ [social gender], as opposed to his/her biological gender.

3. Background

Language "*is what carries and structures thought*"⁴ [translation]. In 1899, Hubertine Auclert underscored the importance of language as a tool for the emancipation of women.⁵

We all learned in school that, in French, "the masculine overrides the feminine". This is the Vaugelas rule⁶, which considered the masculine as the nobler of the two genders; a rule that continues to distort the social representation of the genders⁷ because it makes women invisible or downgrades them. Thus, internationally, it is still "droits de l'homme" [rights of man] that is the expression used to talk about the rights of men and women. The adjective commonly agrees with the masculine when one of the nouns it refers to is masculine (e.g. you write *une mère, un fils et une fille futés* [a clever mother, son and daughter, where "clever" takes the masculine in French])⁸. The feminine is also associated with lowliness (e.g. you say *le grand amour* [great love] [masc.], but *amours enfantines* [puppy love] [fem.])⁹.

However, it was not always this way. Under the feudal system, women held an important place in the public landscape, which was reflected in the language. It was full of feminines (like *emperièrre* [female emperor], *lieutenande* [female lieutenant], *médecine* [female

³ The expression is by the feminist Christine Delphy. It comes up in the interview that Ms. Delphy gave to the newspaper *La Gauche* on June 2, 2002 [on line: www.lagauche.com/lagauche/spip.php?article27].

⁴ Founding call of the association *L'Avenir de la langue française*, published in *Le Monde* on July 11, 1992 with the names of its first 300 signatories [on line: <http://www.avenir-langue-francaise.fr/file/association/Appel11juillet1992.pdf>].

⁵ Fabienne Baider, Edwige Khaznadar and Thérèse Moreau. "*Les enjeux de la parité linguistique*", in *Nouvelles questions féministes*, December 2007 [on line: <http://lmsi.net/spip.php?article697>].

⁶ Claude Favre de Vaugelas, French grammarian who died in 1650. Vaugelas was among the first members of the *Académie française*. He is the author of the famous grammar treatise *Remarques sur la langue française, utiles à ceux qui veulent bien parler et bien écrire*.

⁷ Baider, Khaznadar and Moreau, *op. cit.*

⁸ It was not always this way, and some writers are starting to re-instate the old usage of agreement by proximity, which results in constructions like *les candidats et les candidates choisies* [the male candidates and female candidates selected where "selected" is feminine in French to agree with the nearby feminine word *candidates*] or *les vendeurs et les vendeuses compétentes* [competent saleswomen and salesmen (where "competent" is feminine in French to agree with the nearby feminine word *vendeuses*)]. Jacques Desrosiers gives an excellent summary of the topic in "*Voisinage et collisions*", an article that appeared in *L'Actualité langagière* in 2000 and reprinted in the Translation Bureau's *Chroniques de langue* [on line: <http://btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/chroniq-srch?lang=fra&srchtxt=accord%20proximit%26eacute%3B&cur=5&nbr=6&lettr=&page>].

⁹ Baider, Khaznadar and Moreau, *op. cit.*

doctor] and *bourelle* [female executioner])¹⁰, which fell into disuse after the passing of the Napoleonic code¹¹ which legally subjugated a wife to her husband.

Objecting that feminization is contrary to the spirit of the language is therefore to deny this rich past and, especially, to dismiss a fundamental feature of living languages, namely that they are [translation] “inexorably evolving”¹². Women tend [translation] “to not feel involved, to see themselves ignored”¹³ when a text does not acknowledge their presence.

It can be said that lexical feminization is now part of our moral standards. Simply glance at the job ads on [Publiservice](#), on [Emploi-Québec](#) and other sites to see that the job titles are masculine and feminine everywhere. About thirty years ago, the Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations was feminized¹⁴. When the Prime Minister of Canada addresses the public, he commonly uses the doublet “*les Canadiens et les Canadiennes*” [masculine and feminine forms of “Canadians”]. However, to properly refer to both genders in writing, you have to go even further: it is necessary to express the presence of women throughout the text, and that is the goal of gender-inclusive writing.

A number of institutions have gender-inclusive writing policies or guides¹⁵. In 1995, the Government of Canada, in its Federal Plan for Gender Equality¹⁶, committed to “*adopter une terminologie uniforme sensibilisée au sexisme dans toute l'administration fédérale*”¹⁷.

¹⁰ Jacques Leclerc, *Histoire de la langue française*, chap. 3, on the site of the *Trésor de la langue française au Québec*, hosted by Laval University [on line: www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/francophonie/HIST_FR_s3_Ancien-francais.htm].

¹¹ In other words, the *Code civil*. Céline Labrosse, *Pour une langue française non sexiste*, Boisbriand, Les Intouchables, 2002.

¹² Labrosse, *op. cit.*

¹³ Hélène Dumais, “Pour un genre à part entière”, which appeared in *Recherches féministes*, vol. 5, n° 1, 1992 and viewed on *Érudit* [on line: <http://www.erudit.org/revue/RF/1992/v5/n1/057679ar.pdf>].

¹⁴ *La féminisation au gouvernement de l'Ontario, version corrigée*, Government Translation Service, Toronto, 2003 [on line: www.onterm.gov.on.ca/feminisation.html#historique].

¹⁵ Here are a few examples of various guides (in order of publication year):

- *Pour un genre à part entière. Guide pour la rédaction de textes non sexistes*, Québec, ministère de l'Éducation (Coordination à la condition féminine), 1988.
- *À juste titre. Guide de rédaction non sexiste*, Toronto, Ontario Women's Directorate, 1994 [on line: www.ofa.gov.on.ca/fr/questions-ajustetitre.html].
- *Écrire les genres. Guide romand d'aide à la rédaction administrative et législative épïcène*, Bureaux de l'égalité romands, 2002 [on line: www.egalite.ch/langage-epicene.html].
- *Guide relatif à la rédaction épïcène : respect des genres masculin et féminin*, Université de Sherbrooke, 2008 [www.usherbrooke.ca/accueil/fileadmin/sites/accueil/documents/direction/directives/2600-410.pdf].

¹⁶ Status of Women Canada. *À l'aube du XXI^e siècle: Plan fédéral pour l'égalité entre les sexes*, Ottawa, 1995 [on line: <http://dsp-psd.tpsgc.gc.ca/Collection/SW21-15-1995F.pdf>]. Published in English under the title *Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality* [on line: <http://dsp-psd.tpsgc.gc.ca/Collection/SW21-15-1995E.pdf>].

¹⁷ In fact, the commitment set out in the English version of the plan (“The federal government is committed to: [...] the use of gender-sensitive language throughout the federal government”) has a much broader scope since it talks

The Government Communications Policy of 1996 went even further by requiring federal institutions to “pursue fair communications practices by avoiding sexual stereotyping in their communications, by ensuring representative depiction of all members of Canadian society”¹⁸. The writing guide published by the Translation Bureau that same year¹⁹ suggested several techniques for feminizing texts, stressing the optional nature of feminisation.

However, text feminization cannot be optional, given the goal of gender equality that the Government of Canada has set for itself. There cannot be equality without visibility; in other words, we must ensure that both genders are represented equitably in our writing and can identify themselves.

By ensuring that both genders are visible, gender-inclusive writing contributes to gender-based analysis²⁰, which the government first undertook to implement in 1995²¹ and for which it renewed its commitment in 2009²².

4. Objective

The purpose of this document is to promote the use of writing processes ensuring that women have fair visibility in all of Status of Women Canada’s materials written in French and, by doing so, fostering gender equality.

5. Guiding principle

All of Status of Women Canada’s internal and external documents are written in a way that equitably depicts women and men by giving precedence to the former. To do so, any individual who writes for the organization applies the set of gender-inclusive writing processes available (see the [Guide to Gender-Inclusive Writing at Status of Women Canada](#)),

about language (roughly equating to the concept of syntactical feminization) rather than terminology (equating to lexical feminization).

¹⁸ *Government Communications Policy*, 1996, Treasury Board Secretariat [on line: www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/archives/sipubs/communication/1996/commun01-eng.asp]. This policy was replaced in 2002, and the current policy [on line: <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=12316§ion=text>], which dates from 2006, stresses the principles of diversity and multi-culturalism rather than feminization or the elimination of sexual stereotypes.

¹⁹ *Le guide du rédacteur*, 2^e édition, Translation Bureau, Ottawa, 1996 [on line: <http://btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2guides/guides/redac/index-fra.html?lang=fra>].

²⁰ Gender-based analysis is a method for identifying the impacts of a policy, program or initiative on women and men, in all their diversity.

²¹ Status of Women Canada, 1995, *op. cit.*

²² In response to the recommendations expressed by the Auditor General of Canada in spring 2009, the Privy Council Office, the Treasury Board Secretariat and Status of Women Canada in October of that year tabled the *Departmental Action Plan on Gender-based Analysis* [on line: <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pol/gba-ac/s/ap-pa/index-eng.html>]

by being attentive to both the type of text and the target audience, without sacrificing readability.