

By Zarina Patel

he's an efficient girl, the Matron—the hospital is fortunate in having her."

What is wrong with this sentence? Nothing, most readers will say. But for many of us who have become acutely aware of the role language plays in demeaning women, this sentence is degrading.

The Matron being referred to must be at least 40 years old and probably more, she certainly cannot be in her teens. And yet she is a "girl." Is the hospital administrator ever referred to as a "boy"? Is the male doctor, the male radiographer, the male attendant or the male nurse? Do we refer to them as boys or as men?

The dictionary meaning of woman is an "adult female." Women who insist on being called women are often labelled as cranky or making mountains out of molehills, and even frustrated. After all, what does it matter if one is called a girl or a woman? It's

and directs our growth, it is at the same time a graphic indicator of its contemporary society—its values, ideology, moral outlook and economic and scientific development.

It is not a matter of accident that words such as solidarity, black power, alienation, zombie, feminist and mass action have evolved in this century. They fittingly describe prominent phenomena prevalent in the era of capitalism and imperialism. In Third World countries where family ties are still strong and traditional customs are widely practised, the language reflects this. Terms such as extended family, elders councils, age groups and polygamy refer specifically to social conditions in these societies. Scientific discoveries have given us the jet age, space travel, instant coffee and extra-sensory perception.

In short, language is a reflection of the condition of society—like everything

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just one word instead of another, people say.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

But it does matter and it is not so simple. Words make up a language and language is the single most important tool evolved by human beings to shape and direct their development. It is through language that we communicate, share and exchange ideas, co-operate, establish theory and build on it.

As human beings have continued to evolve more complex forms of material existence, so has language grown in vocabulary, grammatical intricacy, poetic subtlety and scientific accuracy.

It is clear therefore that language not only shapes

else, words have their basis in the factual realities of the community. It follows therefore that as those conditions change, so language too must evolve.

GIRL OR WOMAN

So returning to the girl or woman question, let us see which members of the female sex do get addressed as women. Usually it is the very elderly, or mothers with several children or a female who has made it in a man's world. For example, our women in Parliament, women leaders, women who have proved their worth by male standards. Just as during colonial times, only the few African males acceptable to the colonialists were referred to as men, the rest were boys. Similarly the rest of us are just girls.

