

Interestingly enough, in the national languages of Kenya, it is an insult to call a circumcised female over 13 years of age a girl.

The unmarried woman has to be particularly careful because if she objects to being called a girl, she might end up being called a spinster and the connotations of that word are too well known to need describing. The equivalent term bachelor has a vastly different meaning—everybody loves a bachelor! Bachelors are gay, eligible, free-wheeling and much sought after. Spinsters on the other hand are rejected, dried up leftovers on the shelf. No wonder unmarried women prefer to be called bachelor girls.

The terms *man* and *woman* basically refer to adulthood, the stage that normally follows adolescence. But in our world, girls only become adults when they marry and have children or, as stated earlier, when they achieve parity in a man's world. Only a married woman with kids is considered mature and responsible because society has decided that that is the only role in which women can grow up. A boy, as soon as he has passed his teens, becomes a man even though he may be serving no useful function in society.

Exactly the same form of discrimination was used in colonial times when black men were referred to as boys while white male adults were men or better still, gentlemen'. The racist assumption was that black males could not have the intelligence or maturity which white 'men' were endowed with.

Along the same lines, why does a woman have to be either a Miss or a Mrs. when a man is just plain Mr.? Why is it always so important to know whether a woman is married or not? Because society still considers woman's place is in the home and her most important function in life is that of being wife and/or mother. Hence she must at all times declare her marital status.

Women who feel strongly that they are persons in their own right and have their own identity regardless of



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whether they are married or not, now use the title *Ms.* (pronounced Miz). But it is an uphill battle to get it accepted. Leaving aside all other arguments, it is so much easier if one can address a woman without first having to find out her marital status.

So often we talk of women and kids in the same breath as though the two belong to the same category. For that is in fact how women are viewed in a male dominated society—as children who never really grow up, as weaklings who need constant protection, who rarely can act responsibly, assume leadership roles or shoulder onerous tasks.

That is why we are called girls and not just because it is another word. Some women may feel flattered to be called girls, but they should realise that the term is not a reference to their youth. It assigns to them an inherent immaturity. The languages of male dominated societies are full of such words and phrases, and others which graphically portray the female sex as a commodity, a sexual object, a plaything, a frivolous beauty with no brains and always of secondary importance.

CHICK VERSUS SUPERMAN

These claims may sound exaggerated but let us look at a few examples. How does a man address the woman he loves? Sweetie, birdie, chick, baby kipusa, kidosho (Kiswahili). They don't exactly make the woman feel strong or intelligent but then maybe they are so much in love it doesn't matter. But no matter how much they are in love, the boyfriend is never a chick or birdie—oh no, he is superman, Tarzan, he-man, Samson and always boss! In Kiswahili, he is bwana yangu and bossi.

An attractive woman is described as cute, pretty, delicate, petite. The attractive man is tall, strong, handsome, aggressive, brilliant. The ideal woman is hard-working, co-operative, obedient, faithful, a devoted wife, a loving mother, understanding, patient, caring. The ideal man is powerful, dominant, ambitious, successful, virile,