

## Female Names and Male Names Equality between the Sexes

*Eva Brylla*  
Sweden

### Abstract

A recent contribution to the discussion about equality between the sexes in Sweden concerns the question of whether given names should be related to biological sex. The usual pattern of given names in the Germanic world involves a pronounced difference between female and male names. Eliminating this sex-typed naming custom would have a radical impact on the language.

One function of given names is to individualize. They serve a practical purpose. Gender-neutral names may for obvious reasons create problems. In some countries, unisex names are even forbidden.

The question is whether abolishing sex-typed given names would in practice promote equality between the sexes. Unisex names often tend to evolve from masculine to unisex to feminine names. Sex stereotyping is more rigidly applied to boys than to girls. It is by no means certain that boys will be given female names as frequently as girls are given male ones.

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### Introduction

The Swedish Personal Names Act of 1982 (*Namnlag*; utfärdad [enacted] den 24 juni 1982, 34 §) states that a first name must not be accepted if it could cause offence or result in unpleasantness for the bearer or if, for some other reason, it is evidently not suitable as a first name. On the basis of Swedish tradition it is not the practice to accept female names for a man or vice versa. Two judgments in the Administrative Courts of Appeal (Sw. *Kammarrätten*) have rejected the names *Malin* and *Allan* for a man and a woman, respectively (KR in Göteborg 15 October 2001 and KR in Jönköping 26 February 2003).

In the political debate in Sweden recently, some of the parties (among others, Feminist Initiative [Fi]) have called for an amendment of the Personal Names Act of 1982. One aim is to abolish the difference in first names related to biological sex.

The usual pattern of given names in the Germanic world involves a pronounced difference between female and male names. Simplex names are formed from words which are either masculine or feminine, *Ulf* from OSw. *ulver* ‘wolf’ and *Hildir* from Old Norse *hildir* ‘fight’. Compound male names end with a masculine word and female ones with a feminine word. Female Germanic dithematic names, which like their male counterparts are an Indo-European heritage, show a strong influence from male names. They are instances of *Movierung*, i.e., formation of female names from male ones. In other Indo-European languages as well, e.g., Greek, Indian, Slavonic and Celtic languages, the similarity between male and female names is considerable, but the female ones have a feminine ending. From this, a patriarchal society can be discerned. Regarding earlier conditions it is clear that the man was the centre. In our own times in Scandinavia, the phenomenon of female names being formed from male ones is well known: *Julia* from *Julius*, *Paula* from *Paul*. It is true that the opposite occurs, e.g., Danish *Martinus* from *Martine*, Norwegian *Dortheus* from *Dorthe*, Icelandic *Erlar* from *Erla*, but examples of this are very few (Brylla 2001a: 11 ff., 2007: 191).

From a semantic point of view, male and female first names can reflect different roles. Simplex names consisting of a noun or an adjective generally show, as regards their content, a distribution of ‘manly’ and ‘womanly’ characters, such as courage, strength and quickness, and beauty, love and goodness, respectively.

In the early Germanic nomenclature, a religious element is fundamental to the character of Germanic and indeed of Indo-European personal names in general. Religious associations are manifested, most clearly in theophoric names containing words for divinities as first elements such as \**guða-* ‘god’ in East Gothic *Guduin* and Old Norse *Guðbrandr*, and \**ansu-* ‘an Æsir god’ in Old Norse *A(n)sugastiz*, Old Saxon *Osgar*, and Old Norse *Ásleikr*. A Scandinavian designation for a female divinity, Old Norse *dís* ‘female divinity’, occurs in female names such as *Herdís* and *Vígdís* (Brylla 2001a: 21 f.).

Designations for priests can also be found in personal names, e.g., Old Danish *Guthir* (Old Norse *Guðvér*). These names, according to John Kousgård Sørensen (1989: 5 ff.), are compounded from the word *gud* ‘god’ and a word for ‘priest’.

Both genders are represented in the old Germanic cult, as is shown in the Old Norse word pair *goði* masc. and *gyðja* fem. According to Thorsten Andersson (1998: 15), religious leadership seems to have principally been exercised by men.

A distinctive feature of the Germanic name stock, as well as of those of other Indo-European languages, is dithematic names hinting at warfare and heroism. Gottfried Schramm (1957) has maintained that these names originate from common nouns for men, used in the old heroic literature. Frequently occurring are words for ‘battle’: Old Norse *bǫð* fem., for instance in *Bǫðvarr* masc. and in the name *Bǫðvildr* fem., loaned from the continent; and *gunnr* fem., e.g., *Gunnarr* masc., *Gunnhildr* fem.

Most striking is the fact that the Germanic dithematic women’s names exhibit the same bellicose character as the men’s names. According to Thorsten Andersson (1998: 26 ff. and forthcoming), the two most frequent final elements in Germanic women’s names, *-gunnr* and *-hildr*, cannot simply be explained as instances of *Movierung* of the type common in the Indo-European languages. He argues that notions about Valkyries were also of significance in the development of this name type. Consequently, we can see a connection between mythology, the old heroic literature and personal names, both men’s and women’s, which is most interesting.

### Gender-neutral names

Gender-neutral names, i.e., names that designate both men and women, occur in our onomasticon. On its website, the Swedish government agency responsible for personal names, the Patent and Registration Office (*Patent- och registreringsverket*; [www.prv.se](http://www.prv.se)), has a catalogue of possible gender-neutral names. The list is brought up to date if required. In most cases it deals with loan names, e.g., Asian names as *Hoang*, *Kwan*, *Li* and *Noor*, and names with endings wrongly interpreted in the Swedish system, e.g., *Andrea*, *Nicola*, which in Romance languages are masculine but have been regarded as feminine because of the final *-a*. Several names on the list are of Anglo-American origin, such as *Billie*, *Madison*, *Francis*.

An important function of first names is to individualize – they serve a practical purpose. Gender-neutral names may for obvious reasons create problems. It is true that in other countries and cultures such names do occur, but the phenomenon sometimes causes problems. In China, for instance, a person who is called *Zhang* [surname] *Aihua* [first name] could be either a man or a woman. Therefore, a sign for ‘feminine’ is often put in brackets in official lists to indicate when the name refers to a woman (Brylla 2001b: 39).

In some countries, gender-neutral names are more or less forbidden. In Denmark it has earlier been the practice not to give boys names ending in *-a* or *-ie*, while girls’ names must not end in *-i* and *-y*. In the new Danish law of 2006 it is now possible to approve first names as both male and

female names. The Finnish law concerning first names prohibits gender-neutral names (Brylla 2001b: 37, Lerche Nielsen 2007: 107 f., www.familiestyrelsen.dk).

In the Anglo-American world, gender-neutral names do exist. I have gone through Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges' *A Concise Dictionary of First Names* (2001) looking for such names and found about 150 of them. Among them are short or pet forms that coalesce, e.g., *Bobbie* from *Roberta* or *Robert*, *Charlie* from *Charlotte* or *Charles*. Many of them are feminine Movierung forms from masculine names, e.g., *Billie* from *William*, *Dusty* from *Dustin*, *Jamie* from *James*. Such forms also serve as masculine pet names. Others were originally men's names which, by association with plant or bird designations, have developed into women's names, e.g., *Raven*, *Robin*.

Some formations may be seen as quite neutral, e.g., *Jordan*, a name given to a baby baptized in the holy water of the river Jordan (Hebr. *ha-yarden* 'water stream'), *Noël* (Old French *Noël* 'Christmas' given to children born at Christmas-time), *Paris*, recently called after the city, but originally a male name from the Greek *Paris*, and *Rusty*, a name for a red-headed person.

Some gender-neutral names were originally surnames, e.g., *Ashley*, *Cameron*, *Darcy*, *Evelyn*, *Madison*. The most common reason for a transferred use of a surname is a woman's additional surname, often a name from her father's family. This name may have come to be interpreted as a first name (Hank and Hodges 2001: XII).

The American scholars Herbert Barry III and Aylene S. Harper (1982: 15–22 and 1993: 228–238), who have studied the psychology of name choice, have demonstrated in some studies that names tend to evolve from masculine to unisex to feminine. This prediction is based on cultural attitudes, males being favoured but more limited by sex stereotyping. Parents are more likely to give their daughter a traditional male name than to give their son a traditional female one. Unisex names are avoided for a son but not for a daughter. Some names formed from abstracts, e.g., *Hope*, *Faith* and *Charity*, have evolved from unisex names to female names.

### Gender distinctions

In the Swedish linguistic system, gender distinctions are made. Gender specification is, for instance, announced in the suffixes of occupational designations: *författare* 'author' – *författarinna* 'authoress', *servitör* 'waiter' – *servitris* 'waitress'. We also have different personal pronouns in the third person: *han* 'he' and *hon* 'she'. However, the practice of using occupational designations with feminine endings has lately decreased. Instead, we say for example *riksdagsman* 'Member of Parliament' and *lärare* 'teacher' for both men and women. The use of these designations in a general sense, as well as the generic use of the pronoun *han* 'he' to refer to a person irrespective of gender, while feminine words refer only to women, has been regarded as sexist and discriminatory. This system has been regarded as sexist because it is asymmetric: masculine forms can refer to males or to male or female when no sex-marking is indicated, whereas feminine forms refer to women only. Even in gender-neutral contexts, a generic *han* or an occupational designation in *-man* makes one think of men (Brylla 2007: 192 f.).

In Germany, the discussion about occupational terms has in some cases resulted in a change in language use through active language planning. To make women visible, general occupational designations referring to both men and women have been introduced, e.g., *KollegInnen*, *VerfasserInnen*.

In Sweden, Ann-Catrine Edlund (2004: 263–280) has discussed in a Government report the relationship between occupational designations and sex. She notes an endeavour in language planning lately to use gender-neutral terms. But the results evolve from male designations. Today, words like *frisör* 'hairdresser', *författare* 'writer' and *lärare* 'teacher' can refer to both men and women. Female designations used for men, e.g., *sjuusköterska* 'nurse' and *barnmorska* 'midwife', are very few in number. Few newly formed designations have been created, e.g.,

*riksdagsledamot* ‘Member of Parliament’, but this term seems to have been used only for women, while men are still *riksdagsmän*.

In Swedish the feminine third person singular pronoun is *hon* and the masculine pronoun *han*. Some language planners have suggested variants for *hon/han*: *hen, hän, hin, haon, hoan, hn* and *h-n*. (The first two of these are probably a loan from Finnish, in which the same pronoun is used for both women and men.) According to the Language Council of Sweden (*Språkrådet*, the official language cultivation body of Sweden), the newly formed variants have little chance of succeeding in becoming established in general usage (*Språkriktighetsboken* 2005: 78).

The German linguist Antje Hornscheidt (1998: 102 f.) has studied language change strategies aimed at achieving a non-sexist language. She takes the view that Swedish is not gender-neutral and maintains that non-sexist language change is dependent on other factors than purely linguistic-systematic ones, factors such as different attitudes towards the role of language in society and different perspectives on sexism and feminism. As just noted, it is not easy to introduce new forms in the language system. The word *riksdagsledamot* mentioned above has been adopted more for women than for men. Gunnar Magnusson and Bettina Jobin (1997: 15) have found a similar practice in the use of the generic German term *Lehrkraft* ‘teacher’. The neutral form is most frequently used exclusively for women, thereby marking reference only to women.

Hornscheidt (1998: 103 ff.; see also Jobin 2004: 20 ff.) criticizes some feminist linguists who speak of a sexist language system and who argue that the system as such is sexist because it is asymmetrical: masculine forms (nouns and pronouns) can refer to males or to a male or female when no sex-marking is indicated, whereas feminine forms refer to women only. Hornscheidt wonders whether a system as such can be sexist, or whether we have to take into account language use and language perception as well. Language can only be sexist if it is seen as language use.

## Conclusion

Up to the present, the usual pattern of given names in the Germanic world has involved a pronounced difference between female and male names. Abolishing the sex-typed first name system would have a major impact on the onomasticon.

An important function of first names is to individualize – they serve a practical purpose. Gender-neutral names may for obvious reasons create problems.

The question is whether abolishing sex-typed first names would in practice promote equality between the sexes. In the same way as neutral gender in occupational designations or the generic pronoun *he* can exclude or make one sex invisible, the realization of genderless first names might make women invisible. Unisex names often tend to evolve from masculine to unisex to feminine names and sex stereotyping is more rigidly applied to boys than to girls. It remains to be seen whether boys will be given female names as frequently as girls are given male ones. The women’s name stock may be marginalized.

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[www.prv.se](http://www.prv.se)

Eva Brylla  
Institutet för språk och folkminnen  
Box 135  
SE-751 04 Uppsala  
SWEDEN  
[Eva.Brylla@sofi.se](mailto:Eva.Brylla@sofi.se)