

## The Telegraph

### Feisty, frigid and frumpy: 25 words we only use to describe women



How we feel when we hear these words

This week, [Sir Roger Gale, the MP](#), has come under fire for referring to his female employees as 'girls'. One of his employees, [Debi Hill, has defended him](#) - "he's not sexist and we feel valued by him" - but there has been a furore about his decision to refer to the grown women he works with as 'girls'.

It brings to mind the other words that tend to follow women around workplaces - from 'ambitious' to 'bossy' and the dreaded 'feisty' - a word defined in the [Collins English Dictionary](#) as:

1) *Lively, resilient and self-reliant*

2) *(US and Canadian) frisky*

3) *(US and Canadian) irritable.*

None of these definitions mentions gender. Indeed, the adjective would appear to be gender neutral – until you look at the example sentences given by the dictionary:

"He realised she was not a feisty woman after all," "Our [beauty is now male](#), and is awoken by a feisty young [girl](#)", to "Why were even the most intelligent and feisty women so foolish when it came to being hopelessly in love?" (from the book [Tickled Pink](#)).

Not one refers to a 'feisty male', suggesting the adjective is one of those words that shows a vocabulary gender divide - and a wider level of everyday sexism. A label thrown at women, usually with negative connotations, that would never be used for a man.

Over the past couple of years, there has been a concerted effort to ditch these words. [Sheryl Sandberg and Beyoncé spearheaded a campaign to 'Ban Bossy'](#). A major [study showed that 'abrasive' is regularly used to describe women in the workplace](#). And *Downton*

Abbey actress Daisy Lewis spoke out against 'feisty' - calling it her "least favourite word". She told the *Mail on Sunday's You* magazine: "Have you ever heard a man described as feisty? Have you heard a male character described as feisty? I think not."



Beyoncé: banning 'bossy'

Yet sadly they are still heard across workplaces in the UK today. Here at *Telegraph Women* we've created a dictionary of the words only used to describe women. Beware.

## Airhead, noun

It's a slang term that's meant to refer to 'a stupid or simple-minded person.' Instead, of course, it has come to refer to a woman who enjoys reading about celebrities, or dares to dye her hair blonde.

## Ambitious, adj

The original meaning ('having a strong desire for success or achievement') is still applied to men as a positive trait. In a working woman? It's a dirty word. Cara Delevingne has complained that she's encountered criticism for being ambitious. Even Madonna has said she felt 'being openly ambitious [is] frowned open' in England.

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## Abrasive, noun

'Irritating in manner or personality; causing tension or annoyance.' This is the newest negative term to throw at working women. A recent Fortune study found that it appeared 17 times in women's professional performance reviews and one for men (who were openly encouraged to be 'more aggressive').

## Bitchy, adj

Not only can a woman be a 'bitch', but she can also be 'bitchy' (i.e. 'malicious or snide'). An unpleasant male boss is rarely known as bitchy, although gay men can face a similar plight to

women. But the female equivalent is always given this six-letter description.

## Bolshy, adj

Belongs to the 'ambitious', 'abrasive' and 'bossy' family. Typically used in the workplace.

## Bombshell, adj

Typically used in the phrase 'blonde bombshell', but more likely to be applied to a woman such as Pamela Anderson than the equally blonde actor Chris Hemsworth in *Thor*.

## Bossy, adj

Bossy has become such a contentious adjective that it has its own anti-campaign – 'Ban Bossy', the brainchild of Sheryl Sandberg. The idea? That powerful men are called 'strong-minded', while women are accused of being 'bossy' - a less flattering term - purely because of their sex.

## Breathless, adj

Commonly applied to women who look 'flustered' and suggesting an inability to control one's emotions, or sexuality à la Marilyn Monroe's 'breathy tones'. Smacks of a negative way to reference the female orgasm.

## Bridezilla, noun

Where is the male equivalent? Groomzillas exist too.

## Bubbly, adj

The adjective means 'lively, animated or excited' and tends to be used to describe a woman's personality. When was the last time you heard a man referred to in this way?

Male friends tell me the term has an additional usage - to politely describe girls they like, but are not attracted to.



THIS is bubbly

## Curvy, adj

A man might be plump, or round. A woman will always be curvy. (See also: voluptuous).

## Ditsy, adj

A close relative of ‘airhead’ (see also: ‘bimbo’). ‘Ditsy’ is another word to describe someone who is perceived as being a ‘silly’ woman. It's most commonly accompanied by a patronising tone and rolling of the eyes.

## Emotional, adj

Every human being has emotions. So, as this adjective describes someone who is expressing their natural feelings, you'd expect it to be gender-neutral.

You'd be wrong. While it can be used to apply to men, the word is commonly thrown at any woman who dares mention how she feels, raises her voice, or wells-up with tears. (See also: 'needy').

## Frigid, adj

‘Frigid’ is so commonly used to describe a woman ‘lacking sexual responsiveness’ that even the dictionary defines that meaning as being “especially of a woman.” Because, of course, men are sexually perfect every time. It smacks of Victorian notions of female sexual arousal disorders (see also: 'hysteria').

## Frumpy, adj

The dictionary defines this adjective as being 'of a woman, clothes, etc', though here it isn't about her sexuality, it's about her looks.

## High-maintenance, adj

The 'high-maintenance girlfriend' with her manicures, love of credit cards and incessant demands is a modern day trope firmly rooted in sexism. The 'high-maintenance boyfriend' stereotype is yet to surface.



Elle Woods in Legally Blonde was portrayed as a 'high-maintenance' woman

## Hormonal, adj

Both men and women have hormones, but from the use of the word 'hormonal', you might forget that. Commonly used in conjunction with PMS (pre-menstrual stress).

## Hysterical, adj

Hysteria - an old Victorian condition, just like 'frigidity' - is still applied to women in the form of the adjective 'hysterical' (see also: irrational). Not to be confused with the other meaning of 'hysterical' - being 'hilarious'.

## Illogical, adj and Irrational, adj

If a woman expresses her feelings in a way that's perceived to be 'too much' (see also:



‘emotional’), it’s likely she’ll be called ‘illogical’ or ‘irrational’.

## Pushy, adj

Closely related to ‘ambitious’, ‘bossy’ and ‘abrasive’, ‘pushy’ is another word that sums up gender inequality in the workplace. But it's also favoured as an adjective to describe mums who are heavily involved in their children’s lives and education (see also: ‘Tiger Mother’).

## Sassy, adj

Commonly used to describe a woman with a strong personality and often linked to sexuality and race. Rarely ever meant in a positive context unless, as it reduces women to stereotypes.

## Shrill, adj

Typically used to describe a female high-pitched voice (it's already been thrown at Hillary Clinton). Rarely used to describe an equally high male one.

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## Voluptuous, adj

Similar to ‘curvy’, but with sexual undertones. Defined in the dictionary as being ‘especially of a woman’.

## Whinging, verb

A complaining woman is said to be ‘whinging’. A complaining man is said to be... complaining.

## Working mum, noun

The word ‘dad’ is rarely preceded by ‘working’.

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