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BANK

It's time to #MakeMoneyEqual

The media speaks to men and women differently about money. At Starling, we're campaigning to Make Money Equal. This is our guide to leading the change.





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**Please
welcome
a very
special
guest**

She can't play sports, she can't drive very well, and she's certainly not beach body ready.

Without further ado, please give a casually sexist welcome to gender inequality! A thriving, all-encompassing presence who lives to remind us that we may have entered a new decade but that she's still very much alive and kicking.



And it's not just the wage gap and inexplicably-more-expensive girly pink razors (why? WHY?). She also finds a warm and welcoming home within conversations about money – and more specifically, in the way some of us write about it in the media.

There's coverage that ties women's earnings to their place at home (welcome to the 1950s!) and articles that treat saving like an exercise in squirrelling away pennies to spend on shoes or handbags. Ultimately, the tone of voice is often demeaning, condescending, and dumbed down to make finances feel more "understandable." And they're written for what seems like little girls instead of grown-ass women who know their way around a tax return.

All of this is bad enough on its own, but it gets even worse when you juxtapose it with the way we talk about men's finances, where masculine stereotypes dictate the tone of a piece urging the reader to "conquer" the financial landscape (instead of, say, scrimping and saving). Furnishing one's life with cars, property and investments is championed, while reminders to save in case of divorce (lest ye be swindled by a crafty woman) are mentioned in the background. It's like all the worst parts of Succession rolled into one.

These stereotypes don't reflect the real world. Assigning gender norms to financial discussion – and finances in general – stops men and women from cultivating healthy relationships and having a productive dialogue about saving, investing, spending, and paying off debt. Plus, to be perfectly honest, it's really bloody boring, too.

The time to Make Money Equal has come – and here's how, as journalists, we can help lead the change.



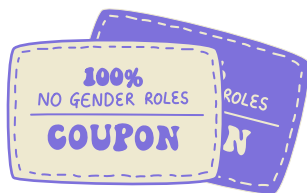
“Masculine stereotypes dictate the tone of a piece urging the reader to “conquer” the financial landscape.”



**CHANGE
OUR
LANGUAGE**

**Talk
isn't
cheap**

The thing is, talking about money should be fun! No, really! (Obviously spending it is even more fun – but today we're being responsible). It can be fun to plan ahead, exciting to think about what you can do with what you've earned further down the road, and satisfying to chip away at debt (if you need to) by tweaking your day-to-day spending habits.



But that sense of fun – or the tone that connotes it – has nothing to do with gender at all. Nor should it shift depending on whom you're targeting. Data shows that the key linguistic differences between the way we talk about finances with men and women reaffirms that one gender gets to have a grand old time with their earnings while the other must be "reigned in" or given "hints and tricks" so as not to "splurge." The former hinges on proactive language: "make money," "impress," "score," "luxury," "stash." The latter? Phrases like "saving pennies," "here and there," and "help."

The approach gets even worse when you realise that 71% of female-centric articles encourage women to specifically seek out vouchers if they intend to spend (as if they can't just go out and buy what they'd like,) while 65% guilt women into "regaining control" by not splurge-spending at all (but then what happens to all those unused vouchers?).

“71% of female-centric articles encourage women to specifically seek out vouchers if they intend to spend.”

As for men? Well, money is seen as an extension of status. And 70% of male-targeted articles have suggested that image and status as a man is a key factor in managing their finances. Which goes for conversations about investing: women are urged to use vouchers to purchase items that should be tied to the home or family, but 73% of pieces suggest that men should make big investments (art, cars, wine, property – you know, the usual) so as to secure their own status. And that's a lot of unnecessary pressure – for everyone. But, well, money is money: it doesn't care what gender you are and it certainly isn't going to morph into a sentient being and suggest you buy a mop or a Ferrari.

Money belongs to us. Not the other way around.



**Women
crying
with
salad**

Obviously, journalists aren't intentionally plotting to perpetuate financial inequality (though if you are: stop this immediately). Especially since so much of the discourse is rooted in longstanding, outdated and quite damaging norms – see: the strong male breadwinner, the gentle, dependant homemaker (or to quote *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula: *a poor unfortunate soul*).

But in terms of finances – and financial “guides” – many still approach women’s spending habits as something to be rooted in “responsibility.” Somehow, pieces about finances are shaped to fit an outdated moral code; a question of right or wrong spending habits. Money, according to these types of articles, is something a woman must be guided on or lectured about (hard pass). And then, it’s accompanied with imagery that suggests finances can be a “minefield” or dangerous (insert stock image of a woman looking, bewildered, at her wallet).

“Imagery tends to show distressed or physically conquered women (often faceless and obscured) looking hopeless or lost,” reports data by Common Industry. “Alternately, isolated piggy banks and recycled jam jars filled with pennies against bleak backgrounds hint at infantile saving methods.”

It also says a lot that when you type 'investment' into the search bar of most women's magazines, the results are generally designer handbags and expensive coats.

Men, on the other hand, are constantly reminded that money equates to strength. Pieces liken their finances to a type of battlefield; an extension of power and of competition and of performance. (Cue: almost every montage in *The Wolf of Wall Street*). If mentioned at all, women are entities to be protected against. They're reminded that it's likely only a matter of time before they're swindled in an epic divorce and that whoever they're going head-to-head with will try to squeeze out what doesn't belong to her.



“It says a lot that when you type ‘investment’ into the search bar of most women’s magazines, the results are generally designer handbags and expensive coats.”

**“It’s a lot
of expectation
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As for imagery? It's equally bleak. Namely, more stock images. "Shiny objects of aspirational value (i.e. money porn glamour shots) such as super cars, yachts, close-up gold bars, large properties, typically featuring a besuited young white male leaning casually, smiling to camera, with an air of smug accomplishment."

This stereotype is good for no-one – and least of all men. It's a lot of expectation to live up to; to be the one who always pays for stuff and never loses control. The one who's dominant and always flush with cash.

Who is this guy anyway? Does anybody even know him? Why don't we get to see his piggy banks and recycled jam-jars? Doesn't he like clothes? Did anyone look at him strangely when he left the bank with a bag of gold bars?

An illustration featuring ten hands of various skin tones (light, dark, and medium) reaching towards a central white coupon with a dashed border. The hands are adorned with various accessories: a pink hair tie, a gold ring, a blue watch, a blue watch, a gold ring, a gold ring, a blue watch, a gold ring, a gold ring, and a red and white striped wristband. The background is a vibrant yellow with colorful geometric shapes in pink, blue, and orange.

100%
NO GENDER ROLES
COUPON

**No
shame**

Or maybe let's ask ourselves *this*:
why can't women collect art?
Invest in cars?
Be told to protect themselves
against divorce or any number
of miscellaneous disasters?



And why can't men redeem a voucher or use their income to contribute to their family? Why shame or guilt at all? Why don't we just unhook conversations about money from feeling bad or feeling inept or feeling like you're defined by how much you earn? Why don't we decide to abolish myths like the following, which embody articles for men:

"Women aren't interested in men who earn less than they do, so take home a jumbo salary now, invest well and you'll get a sailboat or a bathtub on a cliff."

And honestly, what a buzzkill. What a lonely, awful, cold mental picture that sets everybody up to fail. We all know that life is much more than the sum of big ticket items, and that a person is far more than what they earn. We also know this is a very heteronormative approach to earning and talking about income, that makes inequality feel even more stark. Talking about money and gearing it towards actual humans means remembering that most people's relationship with their finances is complex and storied.

Sometimes it's an achievement just to pay rent. Some of us have made minimum credit card payments in rolled coins. Most of us have celebrated paying our phone bill on time. And talking about finances in a realistic way shouldn't come with a shame footnote; it should be easy. It should be painless! Forgiving and exploratory! For most people, having any extra money to save is a win. So let's treat it accordingly.



**“Most people’s
relationship with
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THIS IS WHAT A 'BREADWINNER' LOOKS LIKE



2020 Vision

Here's the thing: gender-centric conversations about money are outdated and boring. Female-targeted pieces with tones like, "Are you guilty of 'financial cheating' and hiding your own treat shopping from your partner?" are embarrassingly mid-century for journalism published in 2020, and they're made worse by the fact that a third of articles mention the woman's responsibility to support family - e.g. paying for kids, buying for loved ones, essentially shouldering the financial implications of being a parent.



In fact, macro-saving techniques – which are also seen in pieces written for women – suggest that the onus of micro-managing every square inch of their household lies squarely with women. (Which is a little odd considering many of them also imply that women don't know how buying products or being alive works).

Tips like "make sure the shampoo bottle is empty before buying more!" and "nab a good deal and haggle for a cheaper price to get yourself a bargain!" walk the fine line between making women feel stupid while still having to be cunning enough to wiggle out of paying full price. Women are now the primary breadwinners in 40% of households, and so conversations about the money they earn should reflect that.



“Women are now the primary breadwinners in 40% of households, and so conversations about the money they earn should reflect that.”

Plus, approaching women as gentle, confused caretakers completely discounts the fact that some men are homemakers, or single dads, or that men and women can be married to same-sex partners. Not to mention trans folk: by splitting discussions about money between male and female stereotypes, there's an erasure of the trans and non-binary experience, too. And as stated before – it's 2020. If we're going to talk about money fairly and equally, let's abandon the types of conversations that are neither. There's too much real and interesting progress to be made.



The good news

...is that it's not a lost cause. And even better, the solution to this is easy and fixable: as journalists, we can change our language around discussions about gender and money – however subtle those changes might be – and begin leaving old habits behind.

To start, we take gender out of the equation altogether. Instead of targeting a piece to men or women – don't. Adopt "they" as a go-to pronoun, and subscribe to giving good, realistic, sound advice that's free of stereotypes and archaic, reductive language.

Which, admittedly, can feel overwhelming, particularly since we've been raised to believe gender dictates a different financial (and life) approach. So instead, consider thinking (and writing) like this:

DO keep it proactive. One of the key tonal differences between the way the media speaks to men and women is that men are told to take action ("make" and "invest") while women are told to "consider" and "wonder."

DON'T assume the interests (or investments) of the reader based on their assumed gender. The truth and beauty of media is that anybody could be (and is) consuming it. The days of gender-targeted finance pieces are long behind us, especially since, well, we all contain multitudes.

DO assume that readers actually get it. A one-two punch of a belittling tone + sexist message is the fastest way to ruin anyone's relationship with money. So give whoever's reading some credit: men's articles tend to err on the side of believing their readers can manoeuvre easily around money (see: the word, "just.") Women? They get condescending reassurance. ("Simply.")

DON'T go on about scrimping and splurging. People don't need our help to feel guilt and shame around saving and spending – they're generally doing a bang up job of it on their own.

DO allow readers to focus on themselves and their goals. Men's articles do this well by referring to their future self ("you") when talking about the long term. Women's pieces tend to include a husband or child, which places a lot of unnecessary pressure on whoever's reading. Women are allowed to think about themselves as individuals, too. Let's champion that.



“Encourage healthy, honest conversations about money by acknowledging the difficulty that tends to accompany someone trying to seek out advice on their finances.”

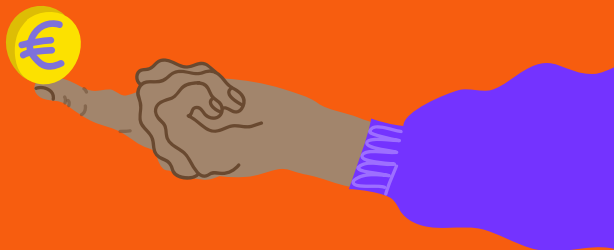
DON'T assign guilt to money. So much discourse around women and finances is clouded by guilt and shame, while men are told to feel proud and ambitious about money (while fighting off FOMO if they don't buy Some Latest Thing). Instead, encourage healthy, honest conversations about money by acknowledging the difficulty that tends to accompany someone trying to seek out advice on their finances. Guilt doesn't belong there. Especially since money can make anybody feel so vulnerable.


DO assume everyone wants to save and feel comfortable. It's not as glamorous as gold bars or a private jet, but by dialing the bravado down a few notches, it's easier to find out what somebody's really hoping to save or pay debts for. Maybe they're even using a piggy bank – but that's their business.



**“I founded a bank,
so naturally, I’m
comfortable talking
about money. But
even I sometimes
feel like I need
to apologise when
I spend money
on myself.”**

Anne Boden
Founder of Starling



An illustration of five diverse people holding hands in a circle against a teal background. The people are: a woman with red hair and freckles at the top, a woman with pink hair and a blue top on the left, a woman with dark skin and a purple top on the right, a man with a beard and a pink top at the bottom, and a man with dark skin and an orange top on the left. The text "WORK COLLECTIVELY" is centered in the middle of the circle.

**WORK
COLLECTIVELY**

**Let's
be real for
a second.**

There's still a long way to go in terms of true financial equality, and it can be overwhelming to think of what needs to be done to push back at the norms and ideologies that are so entrenched in our society. And even more so when you start looking through a truly intersectional lens, taking all the variants of race, class, sexuality and ability into consideration.

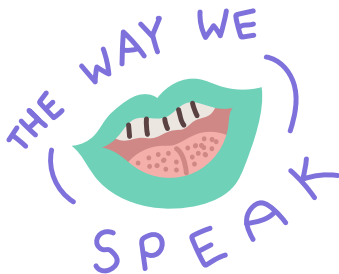
But beginning with the way we speak is a big deal, so don't discount it. Dismantling the status quo hinges on being mindful about the way we communicate and the way we associate gender with money, which would be huge in terms of progress and lasting change.

Frankly, what's most exciting is that by tweaking our language, as writers – by starting at the foundation of the way we relate to and build relationships with each other – we'll begin to see results quickly. And by noticing those results, we'll be even more inspired to re-configure the way we think.

“Making money equal isn’t an unrealistic goal. It’s something each and every one of us can do – and it’s a great mantra to keep in mind when covering money in the media.”

Making money equal isn't an unrealistic goal. It's something each and every one of us can do – and it's a great mantra to keep in mind when covering money in the media. Because when we start there, we can set the precedent for every money-centric conversation everywhere else.

In the immortal words of the iconic nineties dance hit, you – dear fellow journalists – have got the power. So use it.





MONEY
EQUAL



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