Comment on Document L2/16-160 Concerning Emoji Gender Pairs for Professions

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1. Introduction

Proposal L2/16-160 „*Expanding Emoji Professions: Reducing Gender Inequality*" (Been et al.) seeks to address perceived gender inequality in emoji by introducing a set of thirteen emoji gender pairs representing a variety of common professions. While this can certainly be seen as a very noble endeavor in the context of empowering young women (and men) everywhere, I want to inform the Unicode Consortium and the Emoji Subcommittee in particular about what I consider to be fundamental problems in this approach, and also to an extent some more general emoji issues that play into it.

2. Gendered Emoji

Despite popular belief there are as of Unicode 8.0 only 17 human emoji with explicit gender (MAN, WOMAN, BOY, GIRL, OLDER MAN, OLDER WOMAN, WOMAN WITH BUNNY EARS, MAN WITH GUA PI MAO, MAN WITH TURBAN, GUARDSMAN, MAN IN BUSINESS SUIT LEVITATING, MAN AND WOMAN HOLDING HANDS, TWO MEN HOLDING HANDS, TWO WOMEN HOLDING HANDS, FATHER CHRISTMAS, PRINCESS, BRIDE WITH VEIL) while the rest are supposed to take on a neutral appearance. This obviously means that the only three current emoji which represent a modern, common profession (CONSTRUCTION WORKER, POLICE OFFICER and INFORMATION DESK PERSON) are not male nor female. However, this doesn't match with public perception since the former two emoji are usually depicted with short hair, which is stereotypically (and may I add wrongly) associated with men, while the latter is almost universally displayed with long hair for reasons unknown. In a similar vein DANCER is not female either which makes the recent approval of MAN DANCING as a male counterpart all the more jarring.

The design decisions by individual companies have led to a perceived bias against women in emoji when there actually was none in the beginning. The exact same problem occurred when emoji modifiers were added in order to better represent people with dark skin, even though emoji never had any skin color to begin with, and when Apple abused the ZERO WIDTH JOINER character to create diverse FAMILY, COUPLE WITH HEART and KISS emoji, even though neither of those showed any particular gender configuration in the specifications. There is no reason why vendors couldn't simply change their glyphs to be more gender-neutral. In fact, Microsoft and Google (up to Android 6.0.1 at least) already display CONSTRUCTION WORKER, POLICE OFFICER and DANCER without any gender-defining characteristics. A mere font change could result in all people being properly represented regardless of their gender without the need to approve any new characters or ZWJ sequences at all.

In some regards Unicode's gender matching ambitions could even be seen as going too far, as evidenced by the 9.0 candidate emoji MOTHER CHRISTMAS, which seems to be a minor character at best and non-existent at worst in retellings of the Santa Claus mythos. Another issue is PREGNANT WOMAN which is explicitly female due to its name and thus ignores the fact that

trans men for example can also get pregnant. Yet no plans to encode a gender counterpart for it have been revealed so far.

One last point regarding emoji and gender is the fact that not all people are either entirely male or entirely female. Admittedly these so-called non-binary people make up a significantly small part of the population, however they are important to remember here since the proposal by Been et al. seeks to solve gender-representation problems. This is especially true because non-binary people suffer from even less representation in arts and media compared to both men and women, even in the context of gender equality. A close friend of mine is non-binary and is currently studying science. If the two gendered scientist emoji as proposed by Been et al. were to be added to the Unicode standard, my friend still wouldn't have a suiting emoji to represent themself in the context of their education and professional ambitions. If there was however a gender-neutral scientist emoji, everyone – including men, women and non-binary people – would be represented equally.

Because of these reasons I implore the Consortium to not add any more gender-specific emoji if possible. Should the suggested approach to encode professional emoji as ZWJ sequences rather than atomic characters be accepted, I'd like to propose using U+1F464 BUST IN SILHOUETTE or even U+263A WHITE SMILING FACE as base characters rather than MAN and WOMAN. The intended meaning should be deductible regardless if conjoined display of the sequences isn't supported on a particular device. The reference glyphs should look like generic, abstracted emoticons with certain thematic additions, for example a smiley face with stethoscope to represent a doctor or a smiley face with straw hat and pitchfork to represent a farmer. This would fit in nicely with other characters such as FACE WITH MEDICAL MASK or the newly approved FACE WITH COWBOY HAT, both of which are displayed as simplified smileys rather than human-like faces.

In case that an explicit gender designation is desired by a user, they should be advised to form a sequence of a base emoji and a specific gender symbol from the Miscellaneous Symbols block. After all not every possible concept needs to be expressed by a single, atomic emoji character. The guidelines for emoji proposals even state that concepts should be represented by character sequences if possible rather than requesting new, more specific emoji. Considering this it may be advisable to give U+2640 FEMALE SIGN, U+2642 MALE SIGN and other similar characters an emoji presentation via the use of variation selectors. However, this proposal is beyond the scope of this document.

3. Professional Emoji
While it is unfair towards all working people in the world who aren't police officers, construction workers or information desk people, I am strongly opposed to more emoji representing professions and the Unicode Consortium as a whole seems to agree with me on that. Exclusion criteria for emoji proposals state open-endedness as one factor and previously even used professions as an example for that, even though that reference seems to have been removed as of now.

One could argue that the set of thirteen professions in the proposal is broad and common enough to cover most future requests, but this doesn't seem to reflect reality. Once there is precedent for the inclusion of particular professions, emoji users will rightfully be wondering why *that* profession got an emoji but *theirs* didn't and will try to get whatever profession they like to be encoded as well. Given the sheer variety of professions all across the world this could lead to dozens of new proposals with no end in sight. Currently the Unicode Consortium has the legitimate excuse that the three profession emoji mentioned above only exist for compatibility with old Japanese mobile

phone carrier sets rather than because of personal endorsement of any particular job. This could be a difficult stance to hold once more emoji of that type become reality. In my experience the general emoji userbase doesn't care about overspecification. People quite frequently propose a polar bear emoji (despite the existence of U+1F43B BEAR FACE), a pug emoji (despite several dog emoji already being encoded), soft shell tacos in contrast to hard shell tacos or different colors of wine and beer.

The Consortium should also consider whether any of the thirteen proposed emoji are needed at all. Several if not most of them can easily be represented by existing characters without a ZWJ sequence or similar mechanisms. I suspect that everyone will be able to understand that AMBULANCE or HOSPITAL stands for doctors, SCHOOL represents teaching and a TRACTOR is used in farming. GRADUATION CAP is so specific in meaning on its own already and so well-known that a separate emoji for a person wearing a graduation cap seems like redundancy. And so on and so forth. Again I will consult the official guidelines for emoji proposals which list representability by character sequences as an exclusion factor for new emoji.

4. Zero Width Joiner Sequences

Been et al.'s proposal lists several possible approaches for implementing their set of new emoji, but clearly favors ZWJ sequences over all others. This strikes me as strange because so far there has been no example of Unicode approving an emoji ZWJ sequence at all. While Unicode maintains information about these sequences they all were only added to the documentation *after* major vendors (Apple in most cases) already supported them. Smartphone companies don't need permission from Unicode to realise special display options for character sequences and as evidenced by for instance EYE IN SPEECH BUBBLE cross-support between platforms is very likely in any case.

However, Been et al. directed their idea towards Unicode specifically so this might be the time to take a stand against the practice of ZWJ emoji. In my eyes this use of ZERO WIDTH JOINER is a bodged hack that should never have been acknowledged or endorsed by Unicode. ZWJ emoji violate the defined semantics of the control character. There is no example outside of emoji of ZWJ combining several characters into a single, indivisible glyph. KISS sequences are eight whole characters long including variation selectors and FAMILY sequences with two children count seven characters. If in the future vendors decided to add Fitzpatrick modifier support for these sequences we could be up to eleven codepoints for a single glyph.

I am fully aware that ZWJ sequences are being used exactly because they don't have to go through the regular balloting process for new characters, but because Unicode publishes documentation on widely used sequences this sets – in my opinion – a false precedent of anyone for any reason being able to have their custom characters added to an international encoding standard without needing to justify their intentions simply by grouping together unrelated characters with a format control in the middle. This is exactly why Unicode reserves so many characters for private-use purposes and I'm honestly baffled that mobile phone vendors make so little use of that. As I said, the ZWJ sequences are proof that a convention set by the large companies will soon enough be followed by anyone else anyways so interoperability wouldn't be a huge problem.

5. Conclusion

I propose to the Unicode Consortium and its Emoji Subcommittee the following approaches to represent professions in emoji which, in my opinion at least, are more desirable than the options outlined in document L2/16-160:

1. Don't encode any new characters or ZWJ sequences. Instead direct users and vendors towards existing emoji or the private use areas. Encourage companies and organizations to remove any gender-defining characteristics from their existing emoji fonts.
2. Add thirteen ZWJ sequences consisting of BUST IN SILHOUETTE or other neutral characters as a base and the secondary characters proposed in L2/16-160 (HOSPITAL for nurse etc.) as a modifier so to speak. Advise vendors to display these sequences without any gender-defining characteristics or even better as smiley faces similar to other characters in the Emoticons block.
3. Add thirteen new characters with emoji properties to represent the thirteen professions included in L2/16-160. Design the code chart reference glyphs for these characters in such a way that they can't be mistaken for portrayals of actual human beings and rather go with an abstracted, simplified smiley look. Maybe even give these characters unique identifiers such as FACE WITH WELDING TORCH instead of FACTORY WORKER to make the distinction more clear.
4. Add new characters depicting objects commonly associated with the professions mentioned in L2/16-160 (pitchfork, stethoscope etc.). This would require fewer characters than the above approach because several emoji such as GRADUATION CAP or WRENCH already exist.

Please note that this document is *not* meant as a proposal for the new characters mentioned in my third and fourth approach because I am unsure that they are actually needed. I solely included them as alternative solutions to the original proposal by Been et al. for the Consortium to consider in order to solve some of its issues. Should Unicode deem the inclusion of new smiley-style or object emoji necessary a proper emoji proposal document could follow including evidence of frequent requests, long usage potential etc., though not necessarily researched by me personally.

Thank you very much for your attention.