

# Guidelines for Gender-Sensitive Communication

## 1 Why do we need gender-sensitive communication?

The unequal opportunities that women and men have to participate fully in society stem partly from the fact that their life situations are diverse and, in some cases, very different. Societal structures play a role in reinforcing unjust conditions and restrictive role models in this regard.

Since communication mirrors, distorts and shapes social reality, we should strive in our use of language and images to portray men and women in all their diversity. Indeed, language and images are a potential key to societal change, because through them we can influence existing norms and power relations.

In our efforts to produce gender-sensitive messages, we should acknowledge and minimise our own gender bias and use gender-sensitive language and images to make it clear that men and women, and representatives of various genders, are addressed. At the same time, we should represent people of all genders as well as their activities and achievements in an impartial and balanced way.

## 2 Balanced representation

It is important to avoid sexist, racist, homophobic, heteronormative, and other derogatory and discriminatory forms of expression.

A balanced representation implies that no one gender dominates and gender roles are not reinforced. This can be achieved by:

- Using photographs of, seeking the opinions of, providing examples of, and interviewing people of different genders;
- Ensuring balanced representation in details and in the aggregate (e.g. photos should not mirror gender stereotypes; ironic references to such stereotypes should be clearly identifiable as such);
- Avoiding representations of women as the 'other', 'weak' sex and of men as the 'prototypical', 'strong' sex.
- Avoiding figures of speech and images that reproduce stereotypical role models (e.g. girl Friday, the man in the street, Mother Earth, Mother Nature, sportsmanlike, right-hand man, old wife's tale, etc.) and instead showing new gender roles and identities ('new men', 'new fathers', women in careers that are statistically dominated by men, especially in leadership positions);
- Representing the diverse experiences of different age groups, social classes, ethnic and religious groups, and genders;
- Using and representing gender-disaggregated data;
- Avoiding double standards: similar characteristics in men and women should not be connoted as positive in one case and negative in the other.
- Using 'Ms' instead of 'Miss' or 'Mrs', since this form of address doesn't indicate the marital status of the woman to whom it refers.

### 3 Strategies to ensure the inclusion of women and men in language

- It is no longer acceptable to use generic masculine pronouns (he/him/his) in reference to a person who could be any gender. The practice of using both male and female pronouns excludes non-binary/genderqueer persons and can make a longer text very cumbersome.

Nowadays the preferred and most inclusive option is to use gender-neutral third-person plural pronouns (they, their, them) when referring to a single person who could be any gender. This may seem ungrammatical to some, but it is correct and perfectly acceptable in modern English.

e.g.: *A researcher has to be completely objective in their findings. They should not be guided by their personal feelings or experiences. They should be familiar with all existing research on their subject and reference it in their academic writing.*

Using the plural form is another option (*Researchers have to be completely objective in their findings...*), but it may not always be possible.

- Wherever possible, use gender-neutral job titles. In particular, avoid the suffix -man, unless you wish to emphasise that you are referring specifically to a male. Here is a list of some gender-specific job titles and their gender-neutral equivalents:

Gender-specific	Gender-neutral
chairman/chairwoman	chair/chairperson
spokesman/spokeswoman	spokesperson
fireman	firefighter
policeman/policewoman	police officer
actor/actress	actor
businessman/businesswoman	businessperson
salesman/saleswomen	salesperson
air steward/stewardess	flight attendant

- If you want to refer to humanity in general, use phrases such as *human beings* or *humankind* rather than mankind or man.
- Avoid the verb 'to man' and use alternatives (e.g. operate, run, staff, hire personnel, work at, defend, etc.)

## 4 Strategies to make social diversity visible in photographs and illustrations

- Avoid stereotypes (e.g. women in a domestic environment, men in the public sphere) and representations that reduce men and women to their assumed sexual, ethnic or cultural identities or are otherwise reductive and demeaning.
- Avoid typical binary attributions like 'active-passive' and 'superior-inferior' (e.g. a female student in a headscarf seeking advice from a white professor at his desk).
- Depict the diverse social realities of groups of people (different genders, age groups, social backgrounds, ethnic and religious affiliations, etc.).
- Strike a balance between full-body and portrait photos.
- Camera angles should not reinforce stereotypes (e.g. men from below, women from above).

## 5 Resources:

The following resources do not necessarily reflect official IASS policy but are meant to provide further inspiration and reading:

- Extensive list of gender-biased terms with suggested alternatives: <http://www.writinghelp-central.com/gender-neutral.html>
- The 'singular they' and the many reasons why it's correct": <https://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/singular-they-and-the-many-reasons-why-its-correct/>
- "A Guide to Bias-Free Communications" of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, which touches on the issues of age, race, ability, etc.: [https://academicaffairs.ucsd.edu/\\_files/aps/adeo/Article\\_Guide\\_to\\_Bias-Free\\_Communications.pdf](https://academicaffairs.ucsd.edu/_files/aps/adeo/Article_Guide_to_Bias-Free_Communications.pdf)
- "Bias-Free Language Guide" of the University of New Hampshire, which touches on the issues of age, class, size, race, sexual orientation and identity, etc.: <https://www.girardatlarge.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Bias-Free-Language-Guide-Inclusive-Excellence-073015.pdf>
- "GLAAD Media Reference Guide", on referencing lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender persons: <http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD-Media-Reference-Guide-Tenth-Edition.pdf>

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*Developed by Nora Hofstetter, Eva Södermann, Thekla Konieczny and Bianca Schröder on the basis of the Guidelines for Gender-Sensitive Communication of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Translated from German into English and adapted for English by Anne Boden.*

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