

Gender-sensitive Communication

Take care with ‘false generics’

Although gender-neutral language can be a way of overcoming the use of the male as generic, this form of language is not always appropriate. It may ignore key gender elements of the subject under discussion. Furthermore, although the language may appear to be neutral, custom may mean that in practice people continue to interpret a generic reference (such as ‘people’) to mean men.

Examples of gender-neutral language

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In 2014, 14% of people aged 18-65 stated that they had experienced sexual violence in the previous year.

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This language may obscure the fact that women are disproportionately exposed to sexual violence and result in support services not being designed in a way that takes this into account. For example, insufficient numbers of women doctors may be employed to examine victims. If sexual violence is a relatively uncommon experience for men, male victims may need extra support to come forward.

Better language (gender-sensitive)

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In 2014, 23% of women and 5% of men aged 18-65 stated that they had experienced sexual violence in the previous year.

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Lithuania is playing well today and likely to win the match. Lithuania's women will also be playing tomorrow.

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Appears to refer to people in general but actually refers only to men, due to the stereotype that men playing sports is the 'norm'. In contrast when women play sports their gender will often be made explicit, as this is seen as 'atypical' ("Lithuania's women"). This runs the risk of further entrenching common stereotypes. There is no ideal linguistic solution here. To challenge stereotypical thinking it is important either to mention gender when referring to both women and men in sports, or not to mention gender at all (including when the players are women). In this case, in order to avoid confusion it is probably easiest to mention gender in both cases.

Better language (gender-sensitive)

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Lithuania's men are playing well today and likely to win the match. Lithuania's women will also be playing tomorrow.

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Consider

If all countries interpreted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as applying to all people, why was a separate human rights treaty on women's rights (CEDAW) needed more than thirty years later?

Tip: We recommend that **law and policymakers always aim to use gender-sensitive language** rather than gender-neutral language. Giving visibility to gender is an important way for public laws, policies and programmes to reach out more effectively to all members of society. It may be that the gender perspective is not immediately obvious, but there is almost always an important gender dimension to all public policies.