Awareness and recognition of gender stereotypes

Common challenges when using gender-sensitive language

Categories of gender-discriminatory language

There are three broad categories under which much gender-discriminatory language falls:

Stereotypes: assigning gender when gender is unknown or irrelevant as a result of stereotypes.

Invisibility and omission: language which casts the male as the generic norm and keeps women from being visible in public life.

Subordination and trivialisation: language which paints one gender, often women, as inferior, or belittles them.

These three categories are very closely related. In fact, invisibility, omission, subordination and trivialisation stem from gender stereotypes and can reflect attitudes held across society.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are generalised images about people within a society. A gender stereotype is a preconceived idea where women and men are assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their gender.

Stereotypes about gender often take one of two forms. One assumes all members of a category (such as a profession) share a gender, for example the assumption that all company directors are men and all secretaries are women. The other is assuming that all members of a gender share a characteristic, for example believing that all women love to shop or that 'boys don't cry'.

I need to speak to the secretary - is she in the office?

Avoid gendered pronouns (he or she) when the person's gender is unknown

Examples

Gender-insensitive language
The number of years an electrician will spend training depends on what country he is from.

Gender-neutral language
The number of years an electrician will spend training depends on what country they are from.

Gender-insensitive language
Every nurse should take care of her own uniform and cover the expense herself.

Gender-sensitive language
Every nurse should take care of his or her own uniform and cover the expense themselves.

Avoid irrelevant information about gender

Examples

Gender-insensitive language
The eco-action group chairman Moni Patel works closely with the chairman of the social action committee Matthieu Dubios to plan events.

Gender-neutral language
The eco-action group chair Moni Patel works closely with the chair/chairperson of the social action committee Matthieu Dubois to plan events.

Gender-insensitive language
Priti is a career woman.

Gender-sensitive language
Priti is focused on her career.

What do we see?

Occupational References

Biased
businessman
career girl, career woman
cleaning lady
delivery boy
foreman
girl Friday
insurance man
landlady, landlord

mailman
newsman
policeman
repairman
saleslady, salesman
serviceman
steward, stewardess
waitress
workman

Occupational References

Bias-Free

business executive, entrepreneur

professional, manager, executive

cleaner

courier, messenger

supervisor

clerk, office assistant, receptionist

insurance agent

proprietor, building manager

mail carrier, letter carrier

journalist, reporter

police officer

repairer, technician

sales clerk, sales rep, sales agent

service representative

flight attendant

waiter, server

worker