



Focus Module 1

Gender sensitive communication

Introduction to the module



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communication

Since we all been used to learn to talk and write (and so to communicate), we all have traditionally been taught to use masculine nouns and pronouns in situations where the gender of subjects is unclear or variable, or when the group to which we are referring contains both sexes members.

However in the latest decades, as women have become more involved than in the past in public life, work and science fields, experts of communication and researchers have reconsidered the way they express gender identities and relationships.

Because most readers and listeners no longer consider the word “man” to be synonymous with “people”, it became urgent to think more carefully about the ways to express gender in order to convey ideas clearly and accurately.

Moreover, there is a connection between our language use and our social reality; to “erase” women from language can make easier to maintain gender inequality. This means that language choices have consequences and the racism and discriminations that we can see so often in every field of our life, somehow is also related to the words that we use everyday for everything, from text messages to oral chats.

If we believe that women and men deserve social equality, we should think seriously about how to reflect our belief in our language use, starting from learning different strategies to express gender relationships with accuracy. In order to give a real impact to the actions of the organisations where we work in, we must start deleting inequality and discrimination from our language and communication styles.



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From Freedom of expression to Freedom of not being discriminated

While freedom of expression is one of the main principles of a fair communication, there is a need for international debate on reinterpretations of freedom of expression within the framework of women's human rights. With more communication channels than ever, including the hegemony of social media above all, there is a need to redefine this "freedom," taking full account of the contemporary global economic, information, and communication systems and of women's place within them.

While Article 6 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity calls for freedom of expression, media pluralism, and multilingualism, equal access to art and scientific and technological knowledge, including in digital form, and the possibility for all cultures to have access to the means of expression and dissemination as the guarantees of cultural diversity, most women in the developing countries have limited media access and gender justice in media portrayal.





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Developing communication policies focusing on economic development alone may not be a sufficient condition for women's empowerment in developing countries. Communication policies can be successful if strictly related to education, health care and quality of life for women. Media and gender issues are far from being fair and correct even in the developed countries, and women in the developed world continue to struggle to fit gender-sensitive communication policies in the larger context of general development.

One of the strongest points of communication development is to increase the use of neutral gender communication in order to include instead of exclude. Everytime the use of male pronouns identifies both male and female gender, a step away from equality is done.



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The six principles of gender sensitive communication

While some language expressions are meant to be offensive, others do not convey the original meaning or are open to misinterpretation. The following list contains some principles useful to follow the rules of a gender neutral communication: both to avoid misunderstandings while communicating and to keep a communication style the most effective and polite as possible.

1. Make sure that all genders are represented

If we hope all genders should be seen, heard, and treated equally (especially via social media and from organisations working in social fields) it is important to ensure that quotes from all genders (from women and men to LGBTQI people) are included in every communication tool used by the organisation. Additionally, presenting female voices in traditionally male roles and vice versa contributes to deconstructing stereotypes and gender norms.

Such messages, including visuals and written messages can have a positive impact on people's attitudes over time. When preparing press releases, stories and other materials it is important to plan ahead and clarify how women's and men's voices can be captured.





2. Challenge gender stereotypes

Our use of language often reinforces gender stereotypes and assumptions about women, so men are often formed through such gender stereotypes. It is important to avoid it, as gender stereotypes limit and trivialize both women and men, presenting inaccurate images.

In order to empower women and increase the hopes of little girls about their future (and the chance to give realisations to their dreams) it is important to not represent certain job vocations or work roles as only appropriate for, or held by, by women and men. For example, doctors are men and nurses are women. It is also critical to not imply, for example, that women and girls are timid in comparison to men and boys, or that females are passive and males are active. Similarly, one should avoid using phrases that stereotype women's or men's behavior or thought processes. For example, gender stereotypes are deployed when describing men as aggressive or violent, and when describing women as emotional, shrill, or passive.

Gender biased

John and Mary both have full time jobs; he helps her with the housework.

Research scientists often neglect their wives and children.

The average construction worker is experiencing impacts on his health due to hazardous working conditions by the age of 35 years.

Gender sensitive

John and Mary both have full time jobs; they share the housework.

Research scientists often neglect their families.

Recent research revealed that construction workers are experiencing impacts on their health due to hazardous working conditions by the age of 35 years.





3. Avoid exclusionary forms

Exclusionary forms of language indicate the use of “he”/“his” when referring to both a female and male, which excludes females. One can use “he” and “she” to be inclusive, or use the plural ‘they’ to avoid using any gendered pronouns. When using gendered pronouns, it is important not to confuse your target group by using she in one paragraph and he in the next. In these situations, it is good practice to stick to one pronoun, or use a plural, or eliminate the use of pronouns altogether by rewording the sentence. In addition, when used sparingly, using he or she in a sentence can be a good way to include both sexes. This can be a good exercise not only to avoid misrepresentation and mistakes but also to increase the ability to speak to a large, indistinct, discrimination-free auditorium.

the sound of silence

Gender biased

Gender sensitive

Listen to the employee as he uses his short, simple sentences to communicate.

Listen to the employee who is using short, simple sentences to communicate.

Dear Mothers, please ensure that your children wash their hands after using the bathroom.

Dear Families, please ensure that your children wash their hands after using the bathroom.

Everyone must do his part.

Everyone must do their part.





4. Use equal forms of “address”

Addressing women by their marital status is an old practice dating back to the 1700s. Women were often called by their social status, however this practice is no longer appropriate.

While the address ‘Mrs.’ implies that the woman is married, ‘Ms.’ emerged in the 1940s as an alternative to ‘Mrs.’. Today, the ‘Ms.’ form is universally accepted and a good practice to adopt. In the same way, women are often referred to as someone’s partner, instead of an individual in their own right. Clearly, this creates an imbalance in who is deemed important in public life. It is good practice to avoid referring to women as somebody’s wife, widow or mother unless absolutely necessary.

Overall, however, our idea of freedom and correct language of communication ends when the others’ begins, so it is important to be mindful and respectful of how individual women prefer to be addressed.

For example, if a woman refers to herself as ‘Mrs.’, or adopts her husband’s name in correspondence, it is important to respect this choice and subsequently refer to her with the name of her choosing.

Gender biased

Gender sensitive

Miss, Mrs.	Ms.
Man and wife	Wife and husband / husband and wife
Ed Schmidt and his wife Jane	Mr. and Ms. Schmidt / Ms. and Mr. Schmidt





5. Create a gender balance

In written and oral communications, it is important to be mindful of the gender implications of generic terms. Generics are nouns and pronouns intended to be used for both women and men. For example, the terms 'fatherland' or 'mankind' describe concepts that encompass men and women but both terms are evidently male-dominated. Male-specific generics tend to call up primarily male images for readers and listeners. It is best to avoid such generics, to create a more gender-inclusive language. Similarly, word order can often give the assumption that one sex is superior to the other or that the latter sex is an afterthought; so it is better (and communication-fair) to address groups of people with generic terms and eventually using gender-based pronouns if they require it).

Gender biased

Gender sensitive

Fatherland	Native land
Mother tongue	Native tongue
This project aims at building the entrepreneurial capacities of men and women in the district. Outputs will include business trainings for salesmen and owners of small enterprises.	This project aims at building the entrepreneurial capacities of women and men in the district. Outputs will include business trainings for salespeople and owners of small enterprises
Mankind	Humanity, human beings, people





6. Promote gender equity through titles, labels, and names

Titles for people and occupations often reflect inequitable assumptions about males and females; gender-sensitive language promotes more inclusive and equitable representations for both females and males. Referring to a woman as a 'career woman' instead of a 'professional', or to a server as a waitress can exacerbate inequality, as women are not perceived as equal to men. Additionally, feminine suffixes such as -ess or -ette can also reinforce the notion that women are subordinate, or doing a different job to men.

Gender biased

Gender sensitive

Career woman	Professional; executive; business person
Stewardess; waitress	Flight attendant; waiter / server
Spokesman	Spokesperson
Salesman / saleswoman	Sales clerk; sales person; sales representative





Principles for communication materials for a neutral gender communication

Pictures, graphics, video and audio materials are powerful communication tools to influence perceptions, attitudes and social changes. The principles for gender-inclusive written and oral communications above also apply to audio and visual materials (such as videos, photos, infographics and so on). Since nowadays the power of communication of an organisation is strictly connected to its capacity of communication via media and social media, it is important to apply principles of gender-sensitive communications for these tools as well, and to avoid any stereotypical portrayal of men and women in terms of social beliefs, norms of expected behaviour, sexual division of labour, access and control to resources decision making and power differentials.

1. Ensure women and men are represented equally

When preparing written, audio and visual materials, please remember to include both women and men as interviewers, interviewees and speakers. This should be done regardless of the development topic and it should be ensured that the style of expression and the messages convey equal status and authority when altering between male and female voices.

While it may not be possible to have an equal number of women and men in every photograph or video segment, it is important that in the total presentation in these media, the presence of all genders (including LGBTQI when possible) in the society be demonstrated as balanced, not as exceptional or sporadic.

Generally, women should be portrayed as equal and active participants in all aspects of life: in the workplace, in manual labor positions, in volunteering and in white-collar professions; at home; at educational institutions; in politics and in civil society; in public life and in the community.





2. Challenge gender-stereotypes with images

In the same way as written materials, the depiction of both genders should attempt to break with notions of gender roles that perpetuate gender inequalities.

Women and men should be portrayed as equals, rather than having roles and characteristics traditionally assigned on the basis of dominant gender norms. Women should be depicted as being able to leverage opportunities or as having equal opportunities; being in positions of power and in professions that are not usually linked to women. In addition to choosing images that show women in non-traditional and non-stereotypical roles and professions and to ensure equal numbers of women and men in our image selection, it is important to be mindful of subliminal messages about gender norms.

the sound of silence





Practical suggestions for using gender-sensitive language:

1. Use the plural form for both nouns and pronouns

Example: Each student should come to class with his assignments completed
-> All students should come to class with their assignments completed.

2. Omit the pronoun altogether

Example: Each professor should send one of his assistants to the conference
-> Each professor should send one assistant to the conference

3. Use "his or her", "he/she" or "s/he" when you occasionally need to stress the action of an individual

Such references won't be awkward unless they are used frequently.

Example: If you must use a technical term he may not understand, explain it.
-> If you must use a technical term he or she may not understand, explain it.





4. Vary your choice of pronouns when you want to give examples that emphasize the action of an individual.

Ideally, choose pronouns that work counter to prevailing stereotypes.

Examples: Gradually, a child will see the resemblance between block creations and objects in his world, and he will begin to name some structures, like "house" and "door".

-> Gradually, a child will see the resemblance between block creations and objects in her world, and she will begin to name some structures, like "house" and "door".

The kitchen can serve as a center for new experiences, an interesting place where important things happen, and where she has a chance to learn about the way adult things are done.

-> The kitchen can serve as a center for new experiences, an interesting place where important things happen, and where he has a chance to learn about the way adult things are done.

5. Switch from the third person (he) to the second person (you) when this shift is appropriate.

Example: Each employee should report his progress to the supervisor by June 1.

-> You should report your progress to the supervisor by June 1.





6. Use “they” whenever you can.

This option is much debated by grammar experts, but most agree that it works well in several kinds of situations. “They” is traditionally used only to refer to a plural noun. In speech, however, early 21st century English speakers commonly use “they” to refer to a singular person. According to many grammar experts, this usage is incorrect, but here is an example of how it sounds in our everyday speech:

If a student wants to learn more about gender inequality, they should take a look at the university’s equal opportunities website.

In this example, “a student” is singular, but it is replaced in the second sentence by “they”, a plural pronoun. In speech, we often don’t notice such substitutions of the plural for the singular. In writing, however, some will find such substitutions awkward or incorrect. As such, it is best to use “they” mainly in plural situations. Here is one way this can work:

A student’s beliefs about gender equality may be based on what he has heard in the popular media.

-> Students’ beliefs about gender equality may be based on what they have heard in the popular media.





7. Practice using gender neutral nouns.

Here are some examples:

Business man or business woman	Executive, manager or business person
Mankind	Humanity
Fireman	Firefighter
Man-made	Artificial, synthetic or manufactured
Alumni	Graduates
Man	Individual
Policeman	Police officer

