

## **Principles of Gender-Sensitive Communication**

### **UNDP Gender Equality Seal initiative**

#### **Introduction**

Who is this document designed for?

- Colleagues working in communications and knowledge management;
- Gender Focal Points and members of Gender Focal Teams;
- Colleagues speaking on behalf of UNDP.

This guide aims to:

- Help readers identify sexist language; and
- Provide guidance for inclusive language for written communications as well as visual and audio materials.

What is in this document?

1. The rationale of gender-sensitive communications
2. Six Principles for written and oral communications
  1. Ensure that women and men are represented
  2. Challenge gender stereotypes
  3. Avoid exclusionary forms
  4. Use equal forms of address
  5. Create a gender balance
  6. Promote gender equity through titles
3. Three Principles for audio & visual materials

#### **1. The rationale of gender-sensitive communications**

Language plays a critical role in how we interpret the world, including how we think and behave. In the UNDP context, the specific language in which official messages, press releases, social media content, publications, and statements from senior management use provide a crucial model for both, staff and our partners. Word choices often reflect unconscious assumptions about values, gender roles and the abilities of women and men. Gendered language is still commonplace in both the workplace and everyday life. For example, when speaking about a Resident Representative; many colleagues automatically use the male form 'he', not knowing if the person is a woman or a man.



It is important to remember that imprecise word choices can be interpreted as discriminatory, demeaning or biased, regardless of how they are intended. Such language hinders efforts to increase women's empowerment, and is not in accordance with UNDP's goals.

The Strategic Plan 2014 – 2017 underlines UNDP's commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. Therefore, all UNDP communications must portray women and girls, men and boys equitably and fairly. By doing this, UNDP aims to transform attitudes and behaviors related to gender inequality and the exclusion of women. As UNDP personnel and development professionals, it is paramount to examine our messages to reduce or eliminate word choices that silence, stereotype, or constrain others.

While some language expressions are intended to cause offense, others do not convey the original meaning or are open to misinterpretation. This document is intended to be used as a guide, and will not account for all situations where gender-sensitive communication is needed.

## **2. Six principles of gender-sensitive communications**

### **1. Ensure that women and men are represented**

As UNDP's partners are women and men, both should be seen, heard, and treated equally in corporate media products and messages. It is important to ensure that quotes from both men and women are included in press releases, stories and other communications. 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 and men are often formed through such gender stereotypes. It is important to avoid using these, as gender stereotypes limit and trivialize both women and men, presenting inaccurate images.

In UNDP's context, it is important to not represent certain vocations or 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	✓ Gender sensitive
Social Good Summit attendees and their wives are invited.	Social Good Summit attendees and their partners are invited.
John and Mary both have full time jobs; he helps her with the housework.	John and Mary both have full time jobs; they share the housework.
Research scientists often neglect their wives and children.	Research scientists often neglect their families.
The average construction worker is experiencing impacts on his health due to hazardous working conditions by the age of 35 years.	Recent research revealed that construction workers are experiencing impacts on their health due to hazardous working conditions by the age of 35 years.
The policy manual states that the Deputy Resident Representative attends every Project Appraisal Committee meeting at his Country Office.	The policy manual states that the Deputy Resident Representative attends every Project Appraisal Committee meeting at the Country Office.

### 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 audience 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.

✗ Gender biased	✓ Gender sensitive
Each employee will do better if he has a voice in the decision.	Employees will do better if they have a voice in the decision.
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.
The employer will address the situation when he is ready.	The employer will address the situation when ready.
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 husband's full name, for example: 'Mrs. John Smith.' Nowadays 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, 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.
Men and ladies	Men and women / women and men
Man and wife	Wife and husband / husband and wife
Ed Schmidt and his wife Janet	Mr. and Ms. Schmidt / Ms. and Mr. Schmidt
Mrs. Ed Schmidt	Janet Schmidt, Ms. Janet 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. For example, using the phrases *men and women*, or *ladies and gentlemen*, may give this impression. Instead, it is better to address groups of people with generic terms. For example, addressing a group as *colleagues* or *members of the delegation* avoids using any gender bias.

✗ Gender biased	✓ Gender sensitive
Fatherland	Native land
Mother tongue	Native tongue
Man's search for knowledge has led him to impressive scientific discovery.	The search for knowledge has led us to impressive scientific discovery.  People have continually sought knowledge. This led to improved scientific discovery.
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. For example, instead of using *actress* or *stewardess*, for women professionals, it is better to use the generic term (*actor* or *flight attendant*) to avoid promoting gender inequality.

✗ Gender biased	✓ Gender sensitive
Salesman / saleswoman	Sales clerk; sales person; sales representative
Career woman	Professional; executive; business person
Stewardess; waitress	Flight attendant; waiter / server
Male nurse	Nurse
Congressman	Member of Congress
Spokesman	Spokesperson

## 2. Principles for audio & visual materials

Pictures, graphics, video and audio materials are powerful communication tools to influence perceptions, attitudes and eventually social changes. The principles for gender-inclusive written and oral communications above also apply to audio and visual materials i.e. videos, photographs, and info-graphics.

As UNDP uses many of these communications products on a regular basis, it is important to apply principles of gender-sensitive communications for these products 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 including voice-overs, please remember to include women as interviewers, interviewees and speakers at events as well as combining female and male voices in voice-overs. 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, illustration, cartoon or video segment, it is important that in the total presentation in these media, the presence of women 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 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 women and men 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 such as professors, doctors or head of states.

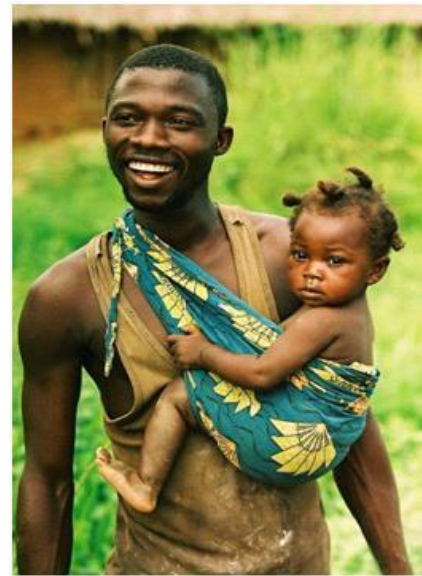
In addition to choosing images that show women in non-traditional and non-stereotypical roles and professions and to ensure equal numbers of women and men in our image selection, it is important to be mindful of subliminal messages about gender norms. For example, it is recommended to choose images in which postures, expressions, gestures and clothing convey equal status and authority.

### Stereotypical images of men



### Non-stereotypical images of men







## Stereotypical images of women



## Non-stereotypical images of women









### Further reading on gender sensitive communication:

- “Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language”, UNESCO 1999,  
- <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001149/114950mo.pdf>
- “Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language”, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Revised 2002, Women in Literacy and Life Assembly (WILLA); Formerly “Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications”; Revised 1985; Created 1975, Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession  
<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/genderfairuseoflang>
- “A guide to gender-inclusive language policy”, Government Office for the South East, 2003  
[http://www.venet-eu.com/assets/mainmenu/197/docs/gender\\_inclusive\\_policy.pdf](http://www.venet-eu.com/assets/mainmenu/197/docs/gender_inclusive_policy.pdf)
- “Guidelines for Gender Sensitive Materials, Advocacy and Communications”, The World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA), 2008,  
- [http://www.waba.org.my/whatwedo/gender/pdf/WABA\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Gender\\_Sensitive\\_Materials\\_Advocacy\\_Communications.pdf](http://www.waba.org.my/whatwedo/gender/pdf/WABA_Guidelines_for_Gender_Sensitive_Materials_Advocacy_Communications.pdf)
- For a good example of applying and reporting on gender-sensitive principles:  
<https://undp.unteamworks.org/node/343453>

### In Spanish:

- “Recomendaciones básicas para el uso de un lenguaje incluyente”, RSC RSC LAC PNUD. Área Práctica de Género América Latina Genera, 2010  
<http://www.unic.org.ar/prensa/archivos/doc%20lenguaje.pdf.pdf>
- “Guía breve para el uso no sexista del lenguaje”, Adaptado de CIPAF, 1992,  
<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CC8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fgenero.bvsalud.org%2Fliidbi%2Fdocsonline%2Fget.php%3Fid%3D226&ei=OHgSUtPGPNsz4AOHz4CIAg&usg=AFQjCNGV40ZwPCkc2xMdtl8BTH8LjABLjw&sig2=6SeZXNcl26FYpn8IH1MqHw&bvm=bv.50768961,d.dmg>

### En French:

- <http://hrcouncil.ca/info-rh/diversite-langage-inclusif.cfm>



## Glossary of UNDP key terms

### Gender

“Refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Other important criteria for socio-cultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age.”<sup>1</sup>

### Gender Equality

“Refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration—recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a ‘women’s issue’ but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development.”<sup>2</sup>

### Gender Parity

“...equal numbers of men and women at all levels of the organization. It must include significant participation of both men and women, particularly at senior levels. Gender parity is one of several integrated mechanisms for improving organizational effectiveness.”<sup>3</sup>

### Gender Mainstreaming

“Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implication for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and

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1 OSAGI, 2001, ‘Gender Mainstreaming: Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality Document’.

2 OSAGI, 2001, ‘Gender Mainstreaming: Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality Document’

3 UNDP Gender Parity Report 2007.



evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Women’s Rights**

“The human rights of women and of the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Discrimination**

“As defined in Article 1, ‘discrimination against women’ shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Gender-based Violence**

“Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women’s ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men....Gender-based violence, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms under general international law or under human rights conventions, is discrimination within the meaning of Article 1 of (CEDAW).”<sup>7</sup>

“...any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”<sup>8</sup>

“...any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially associated differences between males and females. As such violence is based on socially

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4 ECOSOC, 1997, ‘Report of the Economic and Social Council for 1997’, A/52/3, chapter IV, ‘Special Session on Gender Mainstreaming’.

5 UN Secretariat, Inter-agency Task Force on the Implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development’s Programme of Action, ‘Guidelines on Women’s Empowerment’ [[www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html](http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html)].

6 CEDAW

7 Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1992, General Recommendation 19 [[www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm)].

8 DEVAW, Article 1.





ascribed differences. (G)ender-based violence includes, but it is not limited to sexual violence. While women and girls of all ages make up the majority of the victims, men and boys are also both direct and indirect victims. It is clear that the effects of such violence are both physical and psychological, and have long term detrimental consequences for both the survivors and their communities.”<sup>9</sup>

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9 ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment, 2006, ‘Addressing Gender-based violence in Humanitarian Emergencies,’ ‘Gender-based violence and the role of the UN and its Member States’ [[www.un.org/docs/ecosoc/meetings/2006/docs/Presentation%20Mr.%20Michel.pdf](http://www.un.org/docs/ecosoc/meetings/2006/docs/Presentation%20Mr.%20Michel.pdf) ].