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GUIDE TO GENDER SENSITIVE USE OF LANGUAGE



Guide to Gender Sensitive Use of Language

Updated 2nd edition

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About Kadir Has University Gender and Women Studies Research Center

The Gender and Women's Studies Research Center at Kadir Has University aims to create an intellectual locus for interdisciplinary research, teaching and institutional change related to gender equality. One of our goals is to critically re-examine discussions of equality and gender as they pertain to the status of women, while bearing in mind that the field is not limited to male and female prototypes but also includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI+) individuals.

To this end, our mission is to educate and produce research for academic communities and the public, primarily but not exclusively in Turkey, with the hope of contributing to ending sexism and dismantling gender based oppression.

The Center has so far undertaken many projects in different areas such as sexual and reproductive rights, gender equality in higher education, and the prevention of sexual harassment and assault. The center also conducts an annual survey on the perception of women and gender in Turkey.

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GUIDE TO GENDER SENSITIVE USE OF LANGUAGE

Gender inequality manifests itself in every aspect of life. Language and word choices often reveal underlying assumptions about gender. This guide is designed to help.

PROBLEM #1: (NOT) ALL SUBJECTS ARE MALE

The most easily recognizable form of sexist writing occurs in a sentence such as this:

When a student writes a paper, he must proofread carefully.

The sentence assumes that all students are male. To fix the sentence, we must include both genders in the category of “student.” There are several ways to approach this. An easy solution to this problem is to use “he or she” instead of “he.” However, this technique can be awkward especially if overused:

When a student writes a paper, he or she should use the spellchecker on his or her computer.

The abbreviations “he/she” and “s/he” fall into the same category as “he or she.” You can use them, but sparingly; the same holds for the substitution of “one” for “he.”

Solution #1: Try making the subject of the sentence plural:

When students write their papers, they should use the spell checkers on their computers. The plural subject “students” now includes both genders, and the sentence retains its meaning without sounding awkward.

Solution #2: Try to substitute a noun subject instead of a pronoun.

Example: Ask him to define the thesis.

Solution: Ask the writer to define the thesis.

Solution #3: Try substituting the first or second person for the third.

Example: When a student writes a paper, he must proofread carefully.

Revision: When we students write our papers, we must proofread carefully.

Example: When a teacher is strict about spelling, his students will spend more time proofreading.

Revision: When you are strict about spelling, your students will spend more time proofreading.

Solution #4: In some situations, the form one/one’s can be substituted for he/his, but this construction should be used sparingly to avoid changing the tone of the writing.

Example: He might wonder what his response should be.

Revision: One might wonder what one’s response should be.

PROBLEM #2: BIASED WORDS

Like the generic form he, the use of the word man to represent both women and men excludes women, and it minimalizes their contributions and their worth as human beings.

To make language more inclusive avoid exclusionary forms such as:

- mankind
- man's achievements
- the best man for the job
- man the controls
- man the ticket booth

Choose inclusionary alternatives

- humanity, human beings, people
- human achievements
- the best person for the job
- take charge of
- staff the ticket booth

Some forms pose greater problem:

Example: man-made (as in man-made materials).

Revision: Artificial materials, human-made materials

Example: freshman (as in certain official names such as freshman orientation).

Revision: First-year student is an alternative which may work.

When describing a job or career both men and women might perform, avoid using a combined term that specifies gender.

Avoid words and phrases such as

- chairman/chairwomen
- businessman/businesswoman
- congressman/congresswoman
- policeman/policewoman
- salesman/saleswoman
- fireman
- mailman

Choose inclusionary alternatives

- chair, coordinator, moderator, presiding officer, head, chairperson
- business executive, manager, businessperson
- congressional representative
- police officer
- salesperson, sales clerk, sales representative
- firefighter
- postal worker, letter carrier

PROBLEM # 3: TITLES, LABELS, AND NAMES

The titles used to name people and occupations often reflect unequal assumptions about males and females. Gender-fair language promotes more inclusive and equitable representations of both females and males, opening possibilities rather than restricting choices.

Identify men and women in the same way. In most cases, generic terms such as doctor, judge, or actor include both genders. Only occasionally are alternate forms needed, and in these cases, the alternative form replaces both the masculine and the feminine titles.

Avoid words and phrases such as

- stewardess
- authoress
- poetess
- coed
- male nurse
- lady lawyer
- woman doctor

Choose inclusionary alternatives

- flight attendant, steward
- author
- poet
- student
- nurse
- lawyer
- doctor

Try to find alternatives to language that omits, patronizes, or trivializes women, as well as to language that reinforces stereotyped images of both women and men.

Avoid forms such as

- I'll have my girl do that job.
- Maria is a career woman.
- You guys go ahead.
- The ladies on the committee all supported the bill.
- Pam had lunch with the girls at the office.

- This is a man-sized job.
- Old maid; spinster

Choose inclusionary alternatives

- I'll ask my assistant (or secretary) to do that job.
- Maria is a professional. Maria is a doctor.
- Students, class, folks, all of you, third graders
- The women on the committee supported the bill.
- Pam had lunch with the women at the office.
- This is a complex (huge, enormous, difficult) job.
- Single person

Treat women and men in a parallel manner.

Avoid forms such as

- The reporter interviewed Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Mrs. Sandra Day O'Connor (or Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Sandra Day O'Connor).
- The reading list included Jane Austen, Joyce, Proust, and Virginia Woolf.
- The steward seated Mr. Clinton and his lovely wife, Hillary.
- The invitation was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Michael Webber.
- The invitation was addressed to Dr. and Mrs. Michael Webber (when both are doctors).

Choose inclusionary alternatives

- The reporter interviewed William Rehnquist and Sandra Day O'Connor (or Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justice O'Connor, Proust, and Virginia Woolf).
- The steward seated Mr. and Mrs. Clinton.

- The reading list included Austen, Joyce, Proust, and Woolf (or Jane Austen, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf).
- The steward seated Mr. and Mrs. Clinton.
- The invitation was addressed to Dr. Olivia and Mr. Michael Webber.
- The invitation was addressed to Drs. Michael and Olivia Webber.

Use courtesy titles that promote gender equity. Courtesy titles that label a woman regarding her marital status or forms of address that depict a woman as the extension of someone else trivializes and/or renders them invisible.

Avoid exclusionary forms such as

- Miss, Mrs.
- Mrs. Michael Webber
- Mr. and Mrs. Michael Webber

Choose inclusionary alternatives

- Ms.
- Ms. Olivia Webber
- Ms. Olivia Webber and Mr. Michael Webber

Note: Too often, people substitute Ms. for Miss and keep using Mrs. for married women, defeating the original purpose of adopting Ms. to create an equitable form of address for all women regardless of marital status. Use Ms. for married as well as unmarried women.

Additionally

- Use the corresponding title for females ('Ms.', 'Dr.', 'Prof:') whenever a title is appropriate for males.
- Using 'Dear Colleague' or 'Editor' or 'Professor,' etc. in letters to unknown persons (instead of 'Dear Sir' or 'Gentlemen')

Do not label athletic teams according to gender.

Avoid words and phrases such as:

- girl pitcher or lady pitcher
- the Lady Cardinals

Choose inclusionary alternatives such as

- pitcher
- the Cardinals

LGBTI+

In this guide, we also want to offer some inclusive solutions for the all too often sexist, homo/bi/transphobic and degrading terms that are used against LGBTI+ individuals.

As a general rule, we want to avoid terms and expressions that others LGBTI+ individuals or equate them to objects and use more egalitarian and inclusive language.

We hope this is a beginning of helping to develop a more inclusive language.

There is a compiled list of terms related to LGBTI+ community below. We shouldn't forget that many of these terms are constantly evolving, changing and often mean different things to different people. In addition to this, this glossary below gives some words that are seen as offensive or hate speech. Therefore we want to inform readers about how to be more sensitive to others.

Queer: It has been appropriated by some LGBTI+ people to describe themselves; however, it is not universal so it should be avoided unless someone self-identifies that way.

Problematic: Transgenders, transgender.

Preferred: Transgender people, a transgender person.

Offensive: Homosexual.

Preferred: Gay, gay man, gay person/ people or lesbian.

The other offensive expressions:

Butch: A masculine gender identity or expression, which some see as a non-binary gender.

Dyke: A lesbian. Some consider 'dyke' an offensive word, so only lesbians should reclaim it.

Heshe: An offensive term for a transgender woman.

Faggot: Insulting term for a homosexual.

Boydye: A person who identifies as a lesbian woman, and has a masculine gender expression.

Stud: An African-American and/or Latina masculine lesbian.

Tranny: An offensive word for a transgender woman.

Tomboy: A masculine young girl.

More than anything, it is important to identify and address people in a way that they choose to be identified. When all else fails, please ask.

Sources

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