TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE — SEX AND GENDER

Why it matters

Language is powerful. In our communication at Light for the World, we strongly encourage colleagues to think carefully and critically about the impact of the terms and phrases we use. We use respectful, inclusive language that reflects our values as an organisation and accurately represents the individuals and communities we work alongside. This guide focuses on sex and gender. Transformative language guides are also available on **disability** and **anti-racism and decolonisation**. We are conscious of intersectionality[1] and that people may be subject to multiple forms of discriminatory language based on their various social and political identities.

Key Principles

If in doubt, ask
Whenever possible, ask the person or people we are communicating with how they would like to be addressed in terms of their gender identity and preferred personal pronouns (for example: he/she/they/them). Be aware, however, this may not always be possible or appropriate (see Consider context).

Gender neutral language
All genders are equal, and our communications should reflect this. Gender-neutral language is not gender-specific and omits or minimises references to a person's sex or gender. Unless gender and related characteristics — appearance, parental status, etc — is relevant, leave them unmentioned. An exception to this can be Alternative (Alt) Text, which describes an image on a web page and is read aloud by screen readers used by people with visual impairments. If a person's sex or gender is relevant to the overall context of the image, it is fine to include in an Alt Text description. If not, a gender-neutral alternative is to use the person's name, rather than having to identify their sex or gender.

Omit gendered words
Be wary of assuming an undefined person is of masculine gender. If the gender of the person is not known, use "they" or "their" or re-work the sentence to avoid pronouns. For example, instead of "The Emergency Relief Co-ordinator continues **his/her** efforts to coordinate humanitarian assistance", use "The Emergency Relief Coordinator continues **the** efforts to coordinate humanitarian assistance".

Be cautious in using sex and gender interchangeably
A person's gender identity may be different to their biological sex. Sex refers to "biological and physiological characteristics", whereas gender is "socially constructed characteristics". Refrain from using "male" and "female", unless you are talking about the biological sex of a person. Stick to "woman" and "man", depending on the self representation of the person.

Make gender visible when it is relevant
If necessary to include gender in communication, address the formerly excluded gender first. We usually address women and girls first in sentences, for example "girls and boys" instead of "boys and girls". Where appropriate, we also underline the formerly neglected genders. For example, "all people with disabilities – women and girls in particular – are at the centre of our work".

Consider context
A person's understanding of inclusive language will be influenced by several factors, including cultural context. While it is good practice to ask people how they prefer to be referred to, be aware such questions may be confusing in certain contexts. We should respect the terms people choose to describe themselves but also use our judgement to communicate as inclusively as possible.

The below glossary is not exhaustive but gives guidance on some of the most common words and phrases we strongly advise to use (and avoid) in Light for the World's communications. If you have questions, please contact the Global Communications team.

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1   Intersectionality refers to the ways in which different aspects of an individual's identity can expose them to several overlapping (or "intersecting") forms of discrimination and marginalisation.

ENGLISH GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY

In addition to this English glossary of some of the most common terms, **additional guidelines for multiple languages** are available. It was developed by the Gender group, which can also be contacted for more information.

Do use	Don't use	Why
Person Individual	Man	Unless you specifically are referring to a man, use a gender-neutral noun. Do not use "man" if "human" is the meaning. Casting the male experience as generic should be avoided.
Women, men, boys and girls Woman/women	Women and children Lady/ladies	"Women and children" can imply only women are responsible for raising children. In certain contexts, however, like identifying "women and children" as a particularly vulnerable group, the term is fine to use. "Lady" and "ladies" are acceptable in formal settings (e.g. addressing "ladies and gentlemen") but should only be used if "gentleman/gentlemen" would be used in the same context.
People Human beings Humanity/Humankind	Mankind	Using "man" to mean all people collectively propagates the invisibility and omission of women.
To operate To cover To staff	To man	"To man a desk" uses a gendered verb, though the person at the desk might not be a man.
Spokesperson Worker Chair/Chairperson Police officer Postal worker/letter carrier Congressperson Lesgislator Congress representative Member of congress	Spokesman Workman Chairman Policeman Mailman Congressman	We avoid language that suggests men are the default. Avoid the gendered noun in occupations, which suggests all spokespeople, for example, are men. Similarly, "congressman" shows a clear gender bias by implying all congresspeople are men. Be wary of occupational stereotypes, e.g. the use of female pronouns for nurses and male pronouns for scientists.
Business executive	Businessman/business-woman	This vocation can be pursued by both women and men, so a gender-neutral term is best.
Dear Madam or Sir Dear Representative To whom it may concern	Dear Sir	Avoid using "Dear Sir" only as this excludes women. An inclusive approach acknowledges the recipient may be a woman or man.
Parental leave	Maternity/paternity leave	It is more inclusive to acknowledge that parental leave applies all parents irrespective of their gender identity and sex.
Native language or first language	Mother tongue	A gender-neutral equivalent is more appropriate.