



Gender

# Words  
At Work

Building **gender** inclusion through  
the power of language

**aurecon**



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# How to use this guide

People tend to use non-inclusive language unwittingly, often not aware that it can alienate and exclude. This Guide therefore provides a starting point for learning about **gender** inclusive language and communication.

We have tried to avoid creating lists of 'good' and 'bad' language – instead, we explain why and how some language can include or exclude, and provide guiding principles and some examples.

The information provided is not meant to cover all situations. For more information DCA recommends contacting organisations who make up and represent women (such as Working Women's Centres).

**Inclusive language** enables everyone in your organisation to feel valued and respected and able to contribute their talents to drive organisational performance.

## Why **gender-inclusive** language matters

**Language is a powerful tool for building inclusion (or exclusion) at work. The way we speak to each other creates a culture in which everyone – women, men and people of all gender identities – can feel valued, respected, and one of the team (included), rather than undervalued, disrespected, and out of place (excluded).**

Biases, both conscious and unconscious, are often expressed through language. By thinking about our language, we can dismantle some of the unconscious biases we hold and the prejudices behind them.

Research shows that when organisations include all employees and customers they have a lot to gain, including improved performance, productivity, profit, creativity and innovation, access to diverse markets and opportunities, as well as enhancing brand reputation, and employee engagement, commitment, and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

# Make people visible

Language can make groups of people invisible. For example, the use of the term *Chairman* can reinforce the idea that leaders are always men. In this example, there are many words that could be used as an alternative including Chair, Chairperson, Convener, Coordinator, or Leader.

Using 'man' to refer to all people can make it hard to see women as an equal part of the team.

People can also become invisible when universal identifiers are used – for example always using 'he' or 'him' (e.g. *"A real leader should always know what his next step is."*)

Collecting data on gender? The best option is to be inclusive. Often, gender information is unnecessary, but if required, ask about 'gender identity' rather than 'sex' or 'gender'. As well as 'male' and 'female,' people should be given the option to select 'other' and the ability to specify their preferred alternative.

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Mankind	Humanity or human race
Spokesman	Delegate, representative or spokesperson
Foreman	Supervisor, team manager or team leader
Guys (for mixed groups)	Team, folks, you all or people

# But not too visible...

As a general rule, if someone's gender (or other characteristics such as sexual orientation or ethnicity) is not relevant, then don't mention it. If it is relevant, then discuss it respectfully.

Including reference to someone's gender unnecessarily creates the idea that the person referred to is somehow an oddity, and reinforces the notion that these are not appropriate occupations for the people that hold them.

Similarly, mentioning a person's gender identity is unlikely to be relevant in most work situations. For example, *"well-known commentator, author and activist"* is preferable to describing someone as *"transgender commentator and author."*

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Male nurse	Nurse
Lady builder	Builder
Female CEO	CEO
Stay-at-home dad	Dad or homemaker
Woman doctor	Doctor

## Imagine new imagery

Metaphors that include imagery that is commonly shared by one gender (e.g. sporting metaphors) can result in others feeling excluded (e.g. **“playing the man not the ball.”**)

Similarly, when someone takes on a challenge at work, it is more inclusive to use terms such as **‘gutsy’, ‘courageous’** or **‘tough’**, than **‘having balls’** (a specifically male characteristic).

## Lay off labels

Lots of words are used differently for men and women. For example, words like **‘bitchy’, ‘abrasive’, ‘airhead’,** and **‘bubbly’,** are almost never used to describe men.

Similarly, a man showing signs of toughness might be labelled ‘hardline’ and a woman labelled a ‘ballbreaker’ in similar circumstances.



## Minimise 'manteruptions'

Research shows that in many situations, including in the workplace, men interrupt and speak over women, while the reverse rarely happens<sup>2</sup>. This means women speak less in meetings and businesses miss out on their contributions. Evidence also suggests that women are actively punished for making themselves heard<sup>3</sup>.



## Stop the stereotypes

Inclusion happens when people feel that their whole self is understood, respected and included at work, and they are not just seen as a one dimensional stereotype.

A stereotype is a generalised image of a person or a particular group. We can all fall victim to stereotyping that over-simplifies us as people.

Gender stereotyping is extremely common and can include inaccurate stereotypes that women are not suited to particular professions (e.g. mathematics, IT, engineering, mining, building) and are naturally talented

in other areas (e.g. caring, listening, communicating, emotional intelligence).

**“Women take care and men take charge”** is a common gender-based stereotype in the workplace, which misrepresents the true talents of female leaders, and poses serious challenges to their career advancement<sup>4</sup>.

### GENDER-BASED COMPLIMENTS

– *Would You Say?*

“You’re pretty smart for a woman!”

“You’re beautiful when you’re angry.”

“You’re pretty smart for a man!”

“You’re handsome when you’re angry.”

Even seemingly ‘positive stereotypes’ ignore individual differences among members of an entire community or group. Praising a particular action because it is not typical of gender stereotypes is insulting (e.g. **“He’s amazing collecting his children after school!”**) Try substituting the opposite gender into the sentence to know if it’s a compliment (e.g. **“She’s amazing collecting her children after school!”**)

While stereotypes may seem relatively harmless, they still offend, patronise and over-simplify real life.

## Try not to trivialise      Leave the 'Love'

Language that trivialises others and their experiences suggests that the other person is inferior. Trivialising language often reinforces differences in power between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group'.

Words like *'just'*, *'only'* and *'hardly'* downplay a person's contribution. Trivialisation along gender lines can be patronising and often puts down women's work (e.g. *"girls in the office"*, *"just a housewife"*, *"checkout-chick"*). Alternatives like office worker, homeworker, salesperson are preferable.

Remember, good humour does not demean or trivialise gender issues (e.g. *"I wish some woman would come and sexually harass me,"* or *"I'll explain that again, for the benefit of the girls – sorry – ladies – sorry – persons."*) Doing this, devalues their importance.

Words like 'love', 'honey' or 'darling', even when used as terms of endearment, often offend<sup>5</sup>.

Many gender-related words that are commonly considered offensive are still used in workplaces such as *'bitch'*, *'girly'*, *'old woman'* and *'pussy.'* While such language may be acceptable between friends, it is not appropriate in the workplace.

Even when language is not so obviously offensive, phrases like *"man-up"*, *"how are we today, ladies?"*, and *"grow some balls"* can make people feel excluded.

Cumulatively, these can add up to make a work environment where many women – and some men, too – feel 'on the outer'.

## Keep calm and respond

Sometimes our unconscious biases mean we can say things that exclude others – even when we do not intend to. If you are called out for not being inclusive, here are some useful ways to respond, especially if you 'didn't mean it like that!'

- ✓ Getting called out doesn't mean you need to defend yourself – trivialising someone else's feelings (e.g. *"You're over-reacting!"*) doesn't help build inclusion
- ✓ Instead of trying to defend or excuse your actions (e.g. *"I was only joking"*) try focusing on understanding the other person's perspective
- ✓ Say something like, *"I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to offend you."* If you are confused about their reaction ask, *"Could you explain why what I said was wrong?"*



## The courage to call it

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It can be challenging to confront non-inclusive language, especially when it's coming from powerful or influential people in your organisation. But doing so can increase our confidence and promote inclusion at work for all.

- ✓ Focus on the behaviour and avoid labelling, name-calling, or the use of loaded terms (e.g. calling someone sexist)
- ✓ Try appealing to their better instincts (e.g. *"It doesn't seem like you to say something like that"*)
- ✓ Make your views clear and set limits (e.g. *"Perhaps you haven't thought about it before but telling sexist jokes can offend people – please don't tell these sorts of jokes around me anymore"*)
- ✓ Keep it simple (e.g. *"Do you really think that?", "No, I don't think about it that way", "I don't find that funny", "That comment sounds like a put-down of women. Is that what you meant?"*)
- ✓ Try saying something when you are with the person one-on-one (e.g. *"Can we please have a quick chat about the comment you made earlier? It might not have been a big deal to you but..."*)
- ✓ Consider the indirect approach (e.g. *"Wow!" "Hey, let's keep it professional, ok?" "Now that the biased part of the conversation is over, can we move on?"*)

## Sources

The following sources of information were drawn on to develop this Guide:

Queensland University of Technology, *Working with Diversity: A Guide to Inclusive Language and Presentation for Staff and Students*. Available [here](#).

Tasmanian Department of Education, *Guidelines for Inclusive Language*. Available [here](#).

Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Responding to Everyday Bigotry,' January 25, 2015. Available [here](#).

Stop Sexist Remarks: Creating Change One Conversation at a Time, 'Studies of the Impact of Sexist Remarks.' Available [here](#).

University of Melbourne, *Watch Your Language: Guidelines for Non-Discriminatory Language*, 2005. Available [here](#).

VicHealth, *Bystander Action Toolkit Section 4*, 2014. Available [here](#).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See DCA's *Building Inclusion: An Evidence-Based Model of Inclusive Leadership* full research report for a review of this research.

<sup>2</sup> V.L. Brescoll, 'Who Takes the Floor and Why: Gender, Power, and Volubility in Organizations', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2011, pp. 622-641.

<sup>3</sup> Catalyst, *Mentoring: Necessary but Insufficient for Advancement*, New York, Catalyst, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Catalyst, *Women "Take Care," Men "Take Charge:" Stereotyping of U.S. Business Leaders Exposed*, New York, Catalyst, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> A OnePoll survey of 3,000 female workers found 'love' was female employees' most hated pet name. Also on the list were 'darling', 'babe', 'mate' and 'hun'. The survey revealed that almost three-quarters of women think pet names in the office are unacceptable, while one in four said it makes them angry. Available [here](#).



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