Language is organic and can change over time. Words and phrases that were considered progressive ten years ago are not considered so today. This is largely due to the work of a variety of activists who use their experiences to highlight why certain language is helpful or discriminatory. Making honest mistakes in the language you use is okay, it is important to reflect on this to continuously strive to have the most progressive language possible.

List of concepts

Anti-racism - The legacies of colonialism mean that racism is everywhere, and it is not enough to be ‘not racist’, but rather strive toward anti-racism. This means dismantling institutionalised forms of racism and violence, as well as challenging neocolonial structures. As Desmond Tutu said “if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor”. Or as the slogan that could be read on many banners during the Black Lives Matters protests after the police murder of George Floyd: “silence is violence”.

Beyond the binary - This term highlights that we want to move beyond binary thinking for all identities, which are often used to place one group in a hierarchy over others (e.g., straight-queer, white-not white, abled-disabled, man-woman)

Colonialism - Colonialism is when a country violently takes over another country, and forces its way of life (cultural practices, economic development, language, religious beliefs etc.) on the local people. This has created a dynamic whereby the coloniser extracts resources from the colonies in order to further their own development, whilst hindering the development of the colonies. This is the biggest cause of global inequality.

Decolonisation - The process of challenging and undoing colonial structurers that persist today.

Disability language - It is best to follow the lead of people with disabilities and use language that they use to describe themselves. Avoid using victimisation language such as ‘afflicted by’, ‘suffers from’, victim of and instead use ‘has [name of disability or condition]’. Additionally, it is always best to name the structure rather than put the onus on the person with a disability e.g., ‘this building is not accessible for wheelchair users’ rather than ‘she cannot get into the building because of her wheelchair’. Finally, remember not all disabilities are visible! Never presume somebody’s disability status without knowing them. Women Enabled have more helpful information on this!
Equity - It’s more transformative to strive for equity rather than equality. “Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognises that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.” Source: Milken Institute School of Public Health

Historical responsibilities - Countries of the Global North carry the historical responsibilities of our climate crisis through its legacy of colonialism, neo-colonialism and industrialisation and have disproportionately produced and consumed more than much of the people in the Global South. Their responsibility in this regard is to finance, help build capacity and share information to tackle the climate crisis. Source: Action Nexus for Generation Equality

Gender - Gender can be conceptualised as the complex interrelationship between somebodies’ physical body, their identity (how they view their gender), and their social gender (the attributes society gives). This interrelationship is dynamic, these categories are not fixed, and a person’s gender can change. Source: Gender Spectrum

Gender in policymaking

- Gender ignorant - No mention of or attention to gender differences or imbalances.
- Gender-sensitive - The policy recognises differences between men and women and the need not to aggravate gender differences, but there is no concrete plan or strategy to address them.
- Gender-responsive - The policy pays explicit attention to gendered differences and identifies interventions to address gender gaps, but not to the extent that addresses structural causes of inequalities.
- Gender-transformative - The policy explicitly seeks to address root causes of inequality, such as gender roles, norms, and behaviour. It seeks to distribute more equally power and/or access to resources between women and men or between women, including one or more of the following: economic distribution of resources, participation in decision making, intersectional recognition of unique experiences and knowledge. For more info: see: EIGE

Global North, East, South, West - How to refer to different groups of countries is often complicated and contains normative bias. During the Cold War first second, and third world were used to define capitalist, communist and (post)colonies respectively. Developed and developing countries was then used in the years following the end of the Cold War. However, both of these framings imply a hierarchy that places colonisers at the top. In recent years, the terms global North, East, South and West have increasingly been used. These are not strict geographical distinctions, and no categorization is homogeneous but it can be a useful non-normative phrasing to talk about global trends.

Intersectionality - Intersectionality examines the intersections of racism/colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy; and their by-products: classism, homo- and transphobia, cis- and ableism. The concept is used to highlight the fact that people can experience multiple forms of discrimination at the same time. The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is grounded in decades of activism that battled the simultaneous challenges of racism and sexism throughout the 20th century. The core idea is that you cannot separate a person’s identity markers, but these coexist and affects the opportunities available to them in society. The Centre for Intersectional Justice has more helpful resources!

Sex disaggregated data - Data collected and tabulated separately for women and men. Currently data is usually very gender binary, but many civil society organisations are mobilising for more disaggregated data which would include people who do not identify as women or men. Source: EIGE

Structural discrimination / Systems of oppression - Word ‘structure’ here implies that such systems have existed for a long time, and therefore the way they oppress and discriminate against groups is not always overt. Patriarchy and (Neo-)Colonialism are examples of such structures that are embedded into every-day life, meaning that some forms of racism and sexism are often invisible to those not affected. Name the structure not the person, e.g., being a woman is not a barrier, but patriarchy itself is.
Instead of Developed/Developing countries

Use Global North/Global East/Global South/Global West

Why? Developed and developing implies an end goal that can be reached

Instead of Elderly

Use Older persons/ageing people

Why? Elderly implies a dependency/inaibility and is often used to typecast whole generations

Instead of Empowerment (or “giving a voice to the voiceless”)

Use Agents of change

Why? When discussing empowerment, it is important we do not use it as a buzzword, for example vague statements about ‘empowering’ groups can often come from a saviourist standpoint which is not helpful. Additionally, people cannot be ‘empowered’ out of the structures that oppress them, so any discussion of empowerment should be in parallel with addressing such structures otherwise the onus is left on the individual. Agents of change is an alternative conceptualisation to “empowerment”. Recognising the agency of a person, means that you listen to what they have to say, and you respect their experiences and knowledge. An agent of change is working to create systematic change for themselves and their community. You cannot give a voice to someone who already has a voice, but you can lend them your megaphone and give them your seat at the decision-making table.

Preferred language

As a rule, it is always best to use person centred language, which highlights the person who is experiencing a certain situation, rather than making certain characteristics or situations seem inherent. For more examples of preferred language, the [American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org) has developed a good resource.

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<td>He or She</td>
<td>They</td>
<td>Her or She implies a binary conception of gender, whereas they are more inclusive (and succinct!)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men and women</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>Inclusive of all genders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor people</td>
<td>People experiencing or living in poverty</td>
<td>Poor people imply an inherent characteristic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Racialised people</td>
<td>Shows that race is socially constructed by highlighting the process racialised. <strong>Equinox</strong> defines “racialised people” as “individuals and groups who have been subject to a process of racialisation and been ascribed a particular racial category. In European societies, all people are racialised, however we use the term to refer to those that have been negatively racialised or racialised as ‘other’”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable people</td>
<td>People from marginalised groups, disproportionately affected groups, structurally excluded, structurally disadvantaged, people living in vulnerable situations</td>
<td>No one is inherently vulnerable, also it creates a dichotomy of “us and them”. Structures of discrimination create vulnerable situations. Calling someone vulnerable can also be used as a domination technique and diminish people’s feeling of agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Women in all their diversity</td>
<td>Shows the full experiences of being a woman to highlight that women are not one homogenic group, but rather live intersectional lives. The second phrase also includes those living out with the gender binary but who may experience discrimination in a similar way to women</td>
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