NON-SEXIST
LANGUAGE MANUAL

A tool for inclusive language

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Non-sexist language manual. A tool for inclusive language.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in society is often ignored or minimised by the language we choose to use. **Language is a powerful tool that reflects society, and we convey the attitudes, behaviours and norms of our community through our choice of language.** In addition, language determines the tolerance, normalisation and acceptance levels of its speakers shaping their global vision. This means that if a language continues to demean, ignore or stereotype one sex or gender, by using the generic masculine for example, there is a higher chance that sexist behaviours will persist.

English is a natural gender language, which means that some pronouns and most nouns are gender-neutral, while some pronouns and specific nouns mark gender. In order to tackle gender inequality, we must look at the way we communicate. **Using gender-sensitive language and gender-neutral language helps bring about social change and achieve real equality.**

When we talk about gender-sensitive language, we are referring to gender equality through language. This means using language to address women, men, and non-binary people as persons of equal value, dignity, integrity and respect.

On the other hand, gender-neutral language, which is also known as gender-blind language, takes people in general into consideration, with no reference to women, men or non-binary people. As a result, it can contribute to reducing gender stereotypes, but it comes with clear downsides. It often takes the male perspective as its basis and can therefore hide important differences in the roles, situations and needs of women/girls and men/boys.

Metropolis is aware of the gender inequalities in our society, as well as the challenges to leave no one behind.

When policies remain gender-blind, they maintain the status quo and fail to help transform the unequal structure of gender relations. In this respect, only gender sensitive language is likely to be up to the task, highlighting the differences between the needs of women and men, raising awareness of how language affects our behaviour and assumptions about gender roles as well as making people more comfortable with their gender identity.

So, why ever mention gender? We sometimes recommend gender-neutral expressions as a way of avoiding gender-discriminatory language, i.e. language that fosters stereotypes or demeans/ignores a gender. The logic here is: if women and men are treated equally, then gender is "irrelevant" to the discussion and we should not state it explicitly. This is true in many cases, but you will have to decide whether to include gender explicitly on a case-by-case basis.

Firstly, we recommend that policymakers always aim to use gender-sensitive language rather than gender-neutral language. Giving visibility to gender is an important way for public policy to have a positive impact on all members of society. The gender perspective may not immediately be obvious, but there is almost always an important gender dimension to public policy.

Secondly, if you introduce gender dimensions to a policy, you should aim to research differences in the current situation of women and men (based on statistical information and other relevant research), rather than guessing or assuming what these differences are. This will enable you to assess specific needs more effectively and design policies and programmes in a gender-sensitive way.

Metropolis has a strong commitment to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda, especially in terms of accomplishing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Under this framework, it is essential to incorporate the gender perspective into Metropolis's DNA, through awareness of the importance of using gender-sensitive language.

The aim of this document is to provide guidelines and tips on adopting a more gender-sensitive language, avoiding words or expressions that are discriminatory or sexist, giving examples of gender-discriminatory communication, providing tools, and handling other categories of discrimination—such as discrimination based on ethnicity and disabilities—in a respectful way.

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2. NON-SEXIST AND GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

2.1. Stereotypes: Sexist language use

Language often presents sexist stereotypes. Even involuntarily, our word choices express an inequity between different genders, making one superior over others. This might be the case when talking about roles, occupations or titles. In the following section, we will introduce concepts such as pseudo-generic and gender-neutral expressions, sexual stereotyping of roles, and sexism when addressing people formally and asymmetries.

2.1.1. Pseudo-generic and gender-neutral expressions

People often use the words "man" and "he" with a generic meaning. However, these words are very specific and refer to a male person, they are not gender-neutral. Instead, when talking about a group of people of different genders we recommend using plural nouns if possible, such as **"people", "they"**–the most common nonbinary pronoun–or other alternatives.

Avoid	Use instead
Each mayor has to decide who *he* will vote for	Mayors have to decide who *they* will vote for

Moreover, the use of **"they"** and **"their"** in singular is also accepted as an option when you do not know the gender of the person you are talking about.

Avoid	Use instead
Anyone who wants to participate in the project should send me his name via email	Anyone who wants to participate in the project should send me their name via email

Another alternative to eliminate the generic use of "man" is substituting it for gender-neutral expressions such as **"people"** or **"humans"**.

Avoid	Use instead
man, men	person, people, individual(s), human(s), human being(s)
mankind	humankind, humanity
manhood	adulthood

2.1.2. Sexual stereotyping of roles

Men, women and non-binary people's abilities and capacities can be limited by preconceptions that attribute certain roles and even capacities and professions to a certain gender. This can be very dangerous because it continues to enhance gender inequality.

Despite the progress that has been made at an international level to achieve equal rights between genders, there are still some structures in the English language in which one of the genders is implied to be better suited to a certain task, duty, or job. Women may be pictured as "fragile", "irrational" and "nurturing" figures, while men may be portrayed as "powerful", "strong" and "professional" figures.

Here some examples on how gender stereotypes can be avoided:

Avoid	Use instead
They both have full-time jobs; he helps his wife with the housework	They both have full-time jobs; they share the housework
Participants can attend the meeting with their wives	Participants can attend the meeting with their spouses/ partners/guests

The same stereotyping issue affects professions. Jobs have no gender. However, over the years, some occupations have been stereotyped as belonging to one specific gender. This even affects the credibility of the profession in question, as men have traditionally been portrayed as the breadwinners of the family, and all the most prestigious, high-skill and high-paying jobs used to belong to men. On the contrary, occupations that have historically been held by women are considered to be less serious. For this reason, it is crucial to avoid this tendency, and to start using terms that include both men, women and non-binary people when talking about professional positions.

The English language has many gender-neutral job titles that do not specify gender, such as doctor, nurse, firefighter. However, some professions have become so sexually stereotyped that they imply the worker's gender in a hidden way.

This is why it is common to specify the gender when talking about a:
"female doctor", "male nurse", or "female firefighter"
While it is not common the other way around when talking about a:
"male doctor", "female nurse", or "male firefighter"

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Moreover, it is also possible to come across job titles with the suffix -man, for positions that were traditionally occupied by men. Although in Old English "man" had the meaning of "adult person", a modern and inclusive version of English should use a gender-neutral term. In this sense, if we remove the suffix -man or replace it with the suffix -person, we normalise the idea that anyone can perform a job, regardless of their gender identity.

Avoid	Use instead
chairman	chair
congressman	congressperson

However, in certain situations, when talking about a woman fulfilling a certain role, we can change the term and add the suffix -woman (businesswoman, congresswoman).
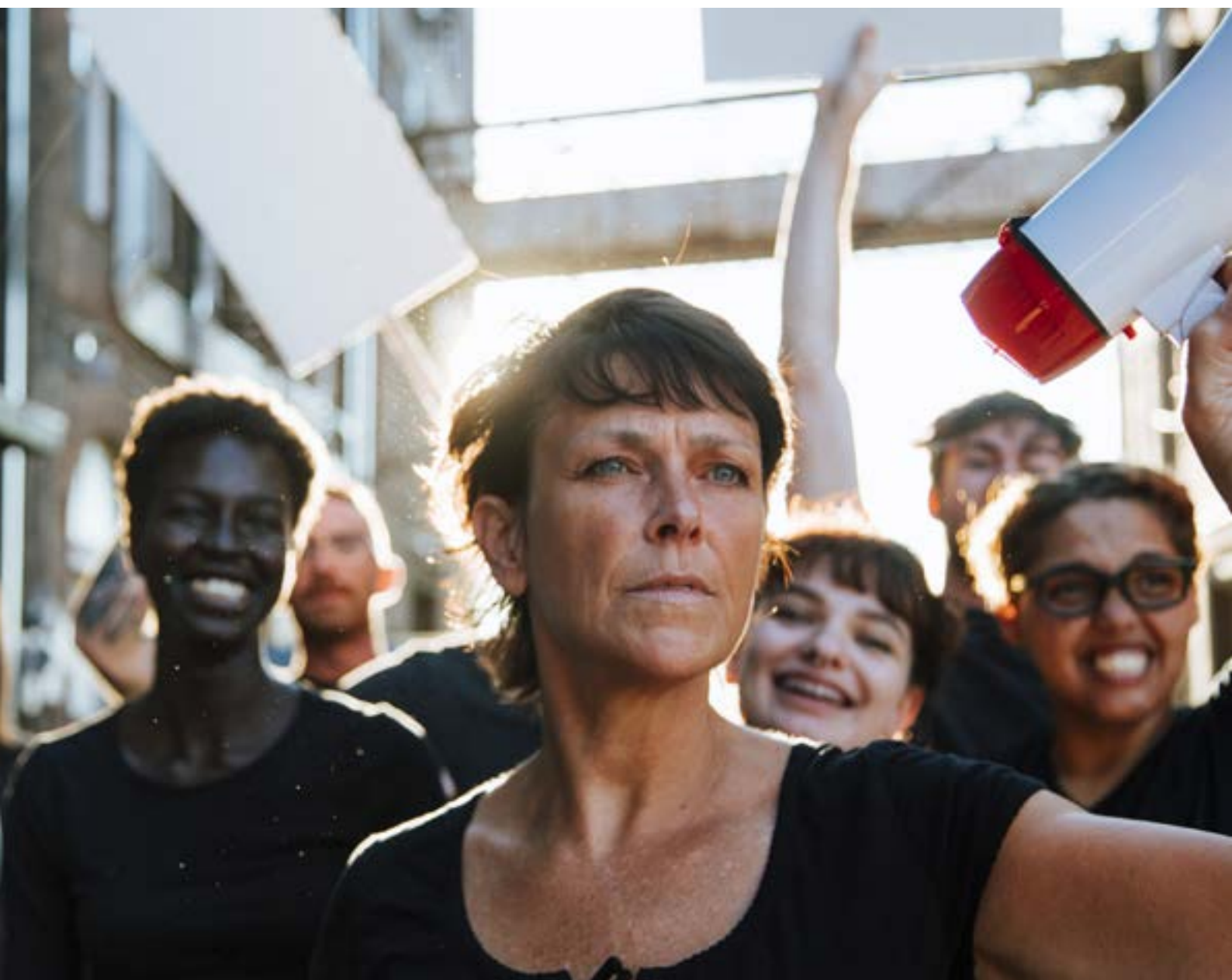
2.1.3. Sexism when addressing people formally and asymmetries

It is important to understand that the titles used to refer to people, professionals, doctors, etc. are not just a superficial formality, and providing equal representation to everyone should always be the end goal.

Traditionally the titles referring to women indicate their marital status—Mrs for married woman and Miss for single woman. On the other hand, the title for men, Mr, is the same regardless of marital status. This practice pays greater attention to women's relationship status (and traditionally, her relationship to a man) rather than to her as an individual. Therefore, to eliminate this discriminatory asymmetry, we recommend using the title **Ms** instead of **Mrs or Miss**, which, just like Mr, does not denote marital status.

Avoid	Use instead
Miss Torres / Mrs Torres	**Ms Torres**

Be careful not to cite only men by surname and women by first name, since this asymmetry reveals a lack of respect for women compared to men. We therefore suggest using parallel forms of reference for both women and men.

Avoid	Use instead
Maria Hendrix and Lopez won the election. Maria and Lopez won the election	**Hendrix and Lopez won the election. Maria Hendrix and Joe Lopez won the election**

Similarly, avoid common unsuitable structures that refer to men by the titles **"Dr"** or **"Professor"** and cite women with the same occupation as **"Ms"**, or only by their first name.

Avoid	Use instead
You should contact Dr Smith or Linda Davis	**You should contact Dr Smith or Dr Davis**
You should contact Dr Smith or Ms Davis	

On the other hand, both **"Ms"** or **"Mr"** should not be used for non-binary people or for people who do not wish to express their gender in their titles, because these two indicate the male or female gender of the individual they are referring to. Some more neutral alternatives are the neologistic honorific **"Mx", "Ind"** standing for an individual, or **"M"** without the following letter identifying a specific gender.

In formal letters, if you do not know who you are addressing, you have two options: The first one is **"Dear sir/madam"**, which implies a gender binary, or the gender-neutral formula **"To whom it may concern"**.

2.2. Resources for non-sexist language use

Language frequently uses expressions that take the masculine form as a generic reference for all gender. In order to assure inclusiveness, writers should take care with the language they use and try to use alternatives to masculine generic forms.

It is highly recommended, whenever possible and depending on the situation, to not make distinctions between genders. For example, if the author's gender is not relevant, the text does not have to include this information through any kind of references.

Over the following pages, we provide some alternative strategies and examples to avoid masculine generic forms. These are ordered so that the most highly-recommended and common strategy is presented first, while the last option shows the least common and least-recommended strategy.

2.2.1. Neutral expressions

This first technique consists of using neutral alternatives to vocabulary when making references to all genders, not only men.

Avoid	Use instead
Mankind	Humanity, people, human beings
Landlord, landlady	Property owner
Policeman, policewoman	Police officer
Man-made	Artificial, human-induced

2.2.2. The imperative

The use of the imperative is perfect for making requests and it brings dynamism to the sentence.

Avoid	Use instead
Every secretary needs to submit her report before 31 December	Please submit your reports before 31 December

2.2.3. The passive voice

This form is also recommended for some types of text, although it may be less dynamic than other forms.

Avoid	Use instead
Each member has to submit his documents before the 31st of January	The documents must be submitted before 31 January
The director will send **his** report to the secretary before publication	**The director's report** will be sent to the secretary before publication

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2.2.4. Omitting gender pronouns through rephrasing

This technique consists of omitting the gender pronouns. This may not be always possible and, depending on the context, it can sound a bit more impersonal.

Avoid	Use instead
The student must have completed the registration form before he applies for the scholarship	The student must have completed the registration form before applying for the scholarship
The employee must clock in before **he** begins **his** working day	The employee must clock in before **beginning** the working day

2.2.5. Using they/their to refer to singular pronouns

The following strategy uses the pronouns **"they"** and **"their"** to talk about singular antecedents without marking gender. This is still relatively uncommon in formal language and there are other techniques that are more popular.

Avoid	Use instead
We need to wait for the secretary to send the report to proceed with the claim, **she** will do it by the end of the day	We need to wait for the secretary to send the report to proceed with the claim, **they** will do it by the end of the day
The new director is going to introduce **her** methods in order to achieve the company's goals	The new director is going to introduce **their** methods in order to achieve the company's goals

2.2.6. Using substitutes for the gender pronoun: who

The use of "who" instead of gender pronouns can allow you to write more neutral phrases.

Avoid	Use instead
If the member does not agree with the board's decision, he can ask for a vote from the assembly	Any member **who** does not agree with the board's decision can ask for a vote from the assembly

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2.2.7. Using definite or indefinite articles (the, a, an)

Another useful technique is to substitute the gender pronouns **"his"** and **"her"** for definite or indefinite articles such as **"the"**, **"a"** and **"an"**. This strategy is similar to the use of "who" as a substitute for "he" or "she".

Avoid	Use instead
Every member has the duty to submit an annual report to **his** supervisor	Members shall submit an annual report to **the** supervisor
Every candidate has to submit **his** presentation note	Every candidate has to submit **a** presentation note

2.2.8. Omitting the pronoun

The following strategy consists of omitting gender pronouns. It only works in some situations, for example, when referring to an indefinite or abstract noun.

Avoid	Use instead
A good president relies, to some degree, on **his** common sense	A good president relies, to some degree, on common sense

2.2.9. Using both masculine and feminine words

This technique consists of using both masculine and feminine forms. If the content does not require a conventional order, these two forms can be used throughout the text to reinforce gender inclusiveness. However, it is recommended not to overuse this strategy in the same sentence or phrase as it can make the text heavy and unreadable. Please keep in mind that this option is binary and would not be suitable for gender-neutral expressions.

Avoid	Use instead
By accepting our data privacy, the member agrees that the company can use **his** data if the situation requests it	By accepting our data privacy, the member agrees that the company can use **his or her** data if the situation requests it

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In summary, we recommend the following strategies:

Strategies	Examples
Neutral expressions	**Humanity** (not mankind)
Imperative	**Please submit your reports** (not "Every secretary needs to submit her report")
Passive voice	**The director's report will be sent** (not "The director will send his report")
Omitting pronouns through rephrasing	**He must complete the registration before applying** (not "he must complete the registration before he applies")
Using plural pronouns to refer back to singular nouns	**The director is introducing their methods** (not "The director is introducing his methods")
Using substitutes for the gender pronoun: who	**Any member who does not agree with the decision can ask for a vote** (not "If the member does not agree with the decision, he can ask for a vote")
Using definite or indefinite articles	**Every candidate has to submit a presentation note** (not "his presentation note")
Omitting the pronoun	**A good president relies on common sense** (not "on his common sense")
Using both masculine and feminine words	**The member agrees that the company can use his or her data if the situation requests it** (not only "his" or only "her")

2.3. Uses to avoid

In this section, we explain some of the uses that should be avoided when the writer is trying to use a more gender-aware language. We have included practical examples and explanations about why these constructions are not recommended.

2.3.1 Slash constructions and combined forms

Slash constructions such as **he/she**, **she/he/they** or **s/he** are quite common to refer to binary expressions, and include both genders (masculine and feminine). However, although this option embraces gender diversity (binary, but not gender neutral), it can be stylistically awkward, and it can draw attention to gender in situations where it is not relevant at all.

Avoid	Use instead
The new employee must fill in this form before **he/she** starts working	The new employee must fill in this form before **he or she** starts working

"S/he". It is frequently used when writing letters, forms or administrative documents. Even if it makes both women and men visible, it is not accepted in documents, publications, and web features because it may cause confusion to the reader. Therefore, it is preferred to use the whole form "he or she".

Avoid	Use instead
The new employee must fill in this form before **s/he** starts working	The new employee must fill in this form before **he or she** starts working

2.3.2. Generic use of "man"

In the English language, there are a lot of expressions that use the masculine form when making generic references to men and women, especially words ending with "man". This use and its derivatives must be avoided, when possible, or replaced with gender-neutral alternatives.

Avoid	Use instead
Statesmen	Political leaders
To man a project	To hire sufficient staff for a project
Manpower	Staff
Frenchman	French person
Man-made	Artificial

3. GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Language can often show assumptions about occupations traditionally assumed to be for men or women, or about people's sexual orientation. In order to avoid this, we must avoid making the presumption that everybody is heterosexual.

Avoid	Use instead
Guests can attend the event with their wives	Guests can attend the event with their partners

The strategy used in this example consists of the use of more general nouns that do not make any reference to sexual orientation or preferences. This technique also works for marital status and gender identity.

Furthermore, references to the sexual orientation of some members of the LGTBIQ+ community because of discrimination reasons. It is not usual to remark on sexual orientation when referring to a heterosexual person, so the same tactic should be used with other sexual orientations. Make sure to avoid the use of quotation marks and italics as they can change the message's tone.

Avoid	Use instead
The gay director will approve the new regulations	The director will approve the new regulations
She said she was a "lesbian"	She said she was a lesbian

Regarding general pronouns usages, the singular **"they"** is the most common nonbinary pronoun, there are others, including but not limited to *ey/em/eirs* and *ze/hir/hirs*. In addition, the Chicago Manual of Style (2017) and the Associated Press Stylebook (2018) affirm, the pronoun **"they"** is appropriate to use in writing when referring to singular antecedents, including when writing for publication.

Furthermore, unless the gender of a singular personal antecedent is otherwise specified, use the gender-neutral singular pronouns **"they", "them", "their",** and **"theirs"**.

Avoid	Use instead
The patient should wait until **he / she** is notified of **his / her** test results.	The patient should wait until **they** are notified of **their** test results.
I asked **him** to send me the report	I asked **hir** to send me the report

In this sense, whenever you are referring to a specific person, you must use the gender and pronouns that the person in question identifies with, if you know what those pronouns are.

4. ORIGIN, RELIGION AND SKIN COLOUR

Diversity in current society, in which different cultures, religions and origins coexist with each other, helps to enrich social, economic, and cultural dynamics, but can also lead to discrimination toward some communities. That is why stereotypes about origin, religion, and ethnicity must be avoided, even if they appear to be inoffensive comments.

The term "race" refers to physical differences that groups and cultures consider socially notable, while "ethnicity" refers to shared cultural features, like language, ancestry, practices, or beliefs. It is important to be aware of the differences between a racial group and an ethnic group, because race is not a universal social construct. That's why the writer should be careful not to impose racial labels on ethnic groups, and, whenever possible, to use the correct and specific racial and/or ethnic term. For example, to use more specific labels that identify the nationality of the person in question. Another relevant consideration is to not make assumptions about ethnic, or religious identities. It is also important to stay informed about complexities within identity.

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Avoid	Use instead
The new secretary is Asian	The new secretary is Japanese

Another recommendation is to avoid the use of nouns when referring to a person's ethnicity. Instead, use adjectives.

Avoid	Use instead
BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) BME (Black and minority ethic) coloured	Non-white people, people of colour
Blacks	Black people

5. PHYSICAL OR INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

Identifying people by their abilities or disabilities is a common mistake. It is important to be aware of the language we use and its connotations in order to ensure inclusion. It also helps avoid negative stereotypes and terms that lead to stigma.

The first step to prevent exclusion is not to describe people as their condition.

Avoid	Use instead
The **deaf** supervisor will be there by 10 am	The supervisor will be there by 10 am

Another important move is to eradicate the use of terms that define the disability as a limitation, for instance, phrases like "suffers from".

Additionally, it is important to consider that most of the disabilities are invisible. So, jokes or expressions at the expense of disabilities must be completely avoided.

Avoid	Use instead
Crazy, psycho, schizophrenic	Person with a psychological disability
Disabled, handicapped	Person with a disability
Birth defect	Congenital disability

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ANNEX: GLOSSARY

Here, we provide a glossary of gender-neutral words to use when you do not know the gender of the person you are referring to, or to designate a group of people.

Avoid	Use instead
Manmade	Artificial, machine-made, synthetic
Assemblyman, assemblywoman	Assembly member
Common man	Average person
Businessman, businesswoman	Businessperson
Chairman, chairwoman	Chair, chairperson
Congressman, congresswoman	Congress representative, legislator
Councilman, councilwoman	Council member, councilperson
Mankind	Humankind
Man; (the) Man	Individual, person; humanity
Anchorman, anchorwoman	News anchor
Spokesman, spokeswoman	Spokesperson, representative, official
Foreman	Supervisor
Career woman	Professional
Master (n), (v)	(n) expert, (v) grasp, be an expert in
Freshman student	First-year student
Cleaning lady	Cleaner
Boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife	Partners, spouses
The average man	The average person/individual, people in general
Landlord, landlady	Property owner, proprietor

Avoid	Use instead
Manhood	Adulthood
Manpower	Workforce, human power, workers, labour force
Manlike	Humanlike
Masterpiece	Work of genius
No-man's-land	Uninhabited land, neutral zone
Policeman, policewoman	Police officer
Maiden name	Birth name

This publication contributes in particular to the efforts of Metropolis to achieve:
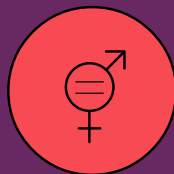
5. GENDER EQUALITY

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