

Getting the Words Right

A Gender Sensitive Language Guide
for the Sri Lanka media

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by Dilrukshi Handunnetti



October 2016

1 Foreword

Internews' work is built on the premise that vibrant local media is crucial in creating a just world where both men and women enjoy equal rights. And we know that when women's voices are heard, and when women produce the news, the information we all consume improves.

But we – the media, the media development sector, and the international community – are far from seeing the balance and parity we want to see.

Women and girls' voices are often ignored and their lives are rendered invisible in the information spaces we all use to navigate our lives, make choices and influence policy. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project's 2014 report:

- Only 24% of the people we read or hear about in print, radio, or television news stories are women or girls, while even fewer are showcased in online news media sources.
- Just 10% of all news stories globally specifically focus on women or girls.
- Roughly 80% of the “experts” interviewed by the news media are men.

We can improve these statistics, with a few key steps.

Include women and girls. Simply getting women's voices on the air makes them a source of inspiration and empowerment in countries where women are often overlooked.

Make it safe. Dozens of organizations are now creating digital security and privacy tools, but these do not always reach women, mostly because most of the trainers on these tools are men. We need to invest in women digital security experts to ensure more women are aware of digital threats.

Start early. The digital divide starts at a very young age, so need to focus on girls, not just women.

Learn through research. In many parts of the world, little is known about the barriers that keep women from accessing and participating in the media and information space. Even less is known about the barriers to women advancing in the field. These issues are also inherently culturally specific and our efforts will need to be placed in context and designed carefully if they are to have any value. We need data to prove that media is better – stories are better – and outlets are more profitable if women are involved.

Together, there are many steps we can take. **This language guide is an important and welcome tool.** I greatly admire the work of Dilrukshi Handunnetti and our partners in Sri Lanka, making strides to create a more equitable, balanced, and inclusive news media sector. When we work together and tackle existing norms that hold back society, we can make a great difference.

Jeanne Bourgault
President, Internews

2 Introduction

In our day to day work, we encounter countless examples of gender stereotypes and poor language use that perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to the promotion of discrimination.

For example, men are often described as heroes and epitomes of strength, with certain characteristics attributed to them. Similarly, women are often portrayed as needing assistance and having weak personalities. Soldiers and freedom fighters – in this stereotypical understanding – are all men. Women often end up being counted among the victims of war, as disempowered individuals, weak and victimised. There is pressure to conform these ‘socially constructed identities and learned behaviour.’

Given that media plays a very significant role in shaping public perceptions about women and men, it is truly important that we avoid gender stereotypes in reporting and analyses – which often limit and trivialise both females and males – in addition to presenting an inaccurate view of our societies, their composition and people’s perspectives.

Journalists are able to influence the language discourse positively by helping change attitudes about the roles played by men and women in societies and break gender-based stereotypes.

We have seen in recent decades, how women’s engagement in various spheres of life has increased, requiring that these changing roles and the contributions they make to societal advantage be

acknowledged in full. We have also seen how societies are reconsidering the way women express their gender identities and relationships. Many consumers of media no longer accept the word “man” to be synonymous with “people” or to include ‘woman.’

As journalists, we need to understand the connection between our language use and our social reality. Because it is also sensible and professional to do so. If we use language that seeks to ‘negate’ or ‘erase’ women from language, it invariably perpetuates gender inequalities.

This booklet is a simple effort to share some ideas and available best practices with the hope that each of us would make the effort to become a gender-sensitive journalists.

This guidebook makes no attempt to abolish words or alter established texts but seeks to promote equality in the use of language and proposes proactive consideration of professional alternatives to foster creative and persuasive use of language equity, in a fair and inclusive manner.

Today, gender sensitivity has become everybody’s business. As for journalists, who play a pivotal role in society, gender sensitivity enables better storytelling through the equitable presentation of both and his and her story.

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3 Making language a choice

When gender sensitive, we become more aware of the way people think about gender and can help people overcome some outdated views of roles played by men and women in our societies.

Journalists deal with words and images. Our language choices are important not only for professional reasons but also for our values of equity and fairness. It is among the industry's best practices to consciously choose more inclusive language that does not define gender in stereotypical forms, and with time, many of our languages have begun developing gender neutral words in place of the traditional usage.

Many languages including the English language have evolved and developed gender neutral words.

For centuries, we have used words that referred to people in general, through the masculine. Terms like "man" and "mankind" were used to describe all human beings. However, these words excluded women but were 'understood' to include women.

When the gender sensitive language discourse gained momentum, many of these references were gradually replaced by more inclusive terms that acknowledge women's dignity and their equal status in the world. A more inclusive language that does not assume that women are included in some of the dated terms have evolved as a result. It is of course, work in progress.

The use of insensitive language, it had been argued for long, to be a conscious effort rather than an innocent practice that does not seek to openly discriminate. The use of such language continues to have a negative cultural effect on societies and foster discrimination with language being used as a not so subtle tool of discrimination. This needs to be recognised as a danger.

By making women invisible through the language choices we make, we also contribute to discrimination and fail to appreciate their contribution to society as well as their very presence.

Gender sensitivity, if understood well, excludes no one but acknowledges all with a sense of equality and fairness. It calls for the use of gender neutral words, to avoid assumptions, use parallel language, describe a woman as her own person, rejects patronising terms such as ‘better half’ and the conscious use of the plural or neutral terms to ensure language equity.

WHO	Reporting journalists, editors, media managers, photographers, media rights groups and others
WHAT	To be sensitive to gender inequalities and portray and treat women and men in a fair, equitable and gender-just manner

WHERE	<p>At all levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At the managerial level where general directions are made - At the editorial/studios/ departments where stories are decided on and coverage determined - On the field, where information gathering takes place - At the individual and editorial desk/studio, when information is being selected for processing
WHEN	At all times
WHY	Fair gender portrayal is a professional and ethical aspiration, similar to respect for accuracy, fairness and honesty

HOW	Achieved through; <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Selection of sources and stories- Fair portrayal of women and men through the elimination of stereotypes- Use of gender fair language- Crafting and angling- Promoting gender equality within the media organizations
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4 Getting the Gender language right

Our language choices do have consequences. If we as journalists believe that both men and women deserve equity and equality, this belief should be reflected in the language choices we make when developing media content.

As a second step, taking the issue of gender equity forward, it would be important to try and select sources and subjects of stories to achieve the vital balance between women and men in a way that reflects the composition of our society, promote portrayals that eliminate stereotypes by the adoption of gender just language, image use and the inclusion of women's perspectives, together with the conscious inclusion of women as commentators and experts.

We need to carefully select sources and stories to achieve balanced representation of women and men in the media, reflecting their composition and perspectives, in making a story that contains diverse perspectives and voices – *as society itself is*.

To get there, we need to be open with the use of language, avoid sexist references, creatively replace outdated words with alternative words, break stereotypes and replace ambiguity with clarity.

For the media to accurately mirror society and produce content that is inclusive, diverse and complete, it is critically important that our stories are relayed through the eyes of women, as well as men, avoiding isolation and gender-based ghettos.

5 The Golden Rule: The Five W's

The 'Five W's' are among the first things we learnt in journalism: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY and **then**, HOW.

To get the language right, simply apply this time-tested formula.

WHO? The journalist

WHAT? Should know the basic gender issues and incorporate such awareness into journalistic work

WHEN? At all times

WHERE? In the newsroom and in the field

WHY? Because professionalism, a sense of fairness and equity require it and good sense demand it

HOW? By being open-minded, inclusive and consciously fair through the selection of stories, sources and presentation (language and visuals)

6 Some Quick Tips:

1. Use neutral terms that favour neither sex and more accurately reflect the purpose of a gathering or a meeting.

For example, rather than “ladies and gentlemen” use “colleagues or delegates.”

2. Avoid using feminine suffixes that reinforce the notion that generic nouns are male, while female nouns are different.

For example, use manager, pilot, executor, for both women and men.

3. Avoid words or phrases that make assumptions about gender.

For example, an invitation to an event that invites both “conference delegates and their wives.”

4. Avoid words and phrases that make assumptions about how women think or look or how men and women behave.

5. When referring to men and women, make sure they’re addressed in similar style.

For example, instead of saying “Mr. Ranasinghe and Seetha Perera,” refer to them as “Sarath Ranasinghe and Seetha Perera” (using both of their first names) or “Mr. Ranasinghe and Ms. Perera” (using titles rather than names).

6. Describe a woman as her own person, and not in relationship to someone else. Instead of saying “Seetha Perera who is married to Sarath Ranasinghe,” say “Seetha Perera, a journalist.”

7. Use parallel language to refer to men and women. Avoid using “men and ladies” or “men and girls.” Instead, say “men and women” or “ladies and gentlemen.”

8. Avoid patronising terms. Don’t use terms like “better half” when referring to someone’s spouse or wife.

9. Use the word feminist instead of “women's libber.”

10. Use terms that can include both sexes such as chair, chairperson instead of chairman.

11. Use plural forms or neutral words to avoid assumptions about a person’s sex.

For example, use ‘doctors bill their patients’ instead of ‘a doctor bills his patients.’

12. Replace gender-specific words with gender-neutral words. (Please note that some people still feel more comfortable with traditional titles. So, if a woman prefers to be called chairman, rather than chairperson, use the preferred term.)

7 Practice makes perfect

Check this chart out and practice the use of gender neutral language.

Traditional	Alternative
Mankind or man	Humanity
Spokesman	Spokesperson
Waiter/waitress	Service person/staff
Repairman	Technician
Man-made	Artificial/manufactured/synthetic
Fireman	Fire fighter
Manpower	Workforce/Staff /Personnel
Business man or business woman	Business executive or business person
Frenchmen	French nationals
Policeman	Police officer
Chairman	Chair/chairperson
Forefathers	Founders

8 Stereotyping professions

It is still a common practice to associate men and women with certain professions. Check this list of gender-neutral terms and add your own.

Traditional usage	Gender-sensitive language usage
Anchorman	Anchor
Businessman	Business manager, executive, head of firm
Businessmen	business community, business people
Cameraman	Photographer, camera operator
Cameramen	Camera crew
Chairman	Chairperson, chair, president, presiding officer
Cleaning lady	Cleaner, housekeeper
Craftsman	Craftsperson
Delivery boy	Messenger
Fireman	Fire-fighter
Housewife	Homemaker
Maid	Domestic worker
Manpower	Workforce
Policeman	Police officer

Salesman / girl	Shop assistant, sales assistant, shop worker; (<i>plural</i>) sales staff
Spokesman	Representative, spokesperson
Steward / stewardess	Flight attendant; (<i>plural</i>) cabin crew
Waiter, waitress	Server
Watchman	Security Guard
Women doctor; male nurse	Doctor; nurse
Workmen's compensation	Worker's compensation

Note: Unless the gender of that person is known and is relevant to the context, avoid identifying the gender.

9 Check List: Towards language equity

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves to check against language insensitivity.

Inclusion:

Who are the sources?

Are the sources representative?

How many sources are women and minority groups?

What other sources can we include?

Presentation:

From whose point of view is the news reported?

What other points of view will you include?

Does the report include women and others who generally go missing in the media?

Are there double standards in the report, also applicable to female and male subjects?

How will you avoid it?

Are stereotypes used in the report?

Are men and women associated with certain characteristics?

How will you avoid it?

Language:

Is there ambiguity in the language used?

Is the language objective enough, enabling the public to form own opinions?

What kind of language will you use instead?

Is the report contextualised?

What would you do to give a better context?

Do the images used match the text?

What kind of images will you look for?

Will the language and images contribute to better public understanding?

10 Language as enabler and equaliser

It is not only about balancing sources and being context sensitive. Journalism has lots to do with language and visualisation.

Whether you are scripting for a television documentary, radio news bulletin or writing a story for a print or online publication, the words we use truly matter.

Language is a socially –informed tool, and for it to be used as an enabler and equaliser, we need to use language consciously and carefully. For women to appear truly equal, then they must be both seen and heard, in equal measure.

This also means, as journalists, taking practical steps to eliminate language that is unfair, judgemental, stereotypical, misrepresentative **or** tends to exclude or offend women.

Careful use of language and images in the media will give a more accurate reflection of your audience or readership, and this can positively affect people's consciousness over time.

The media can be proactive in changing perceptions about people in a society by using alternate terms regularly and explaining why a term has become negative and no longer acceptable as being representative or fair.

BOX: 'Man' (no more) as generic noun

Sexist language reflects the idea that one sex is superior to the other. It also imposes stereotypes and mainstreams them.

Such language use contributes, promotes or results in the oppression of one of the sexes to the detriment of the other.

The English language tends to use “man” as a generic noun, as if men represent the entire human race.

Unless the gender of the subject is known and is relevant to the context, avoid using “he” as a generic pronoun.

Gender-insensitive language	Gender-sensitive language
The student is going back to school today. He will continue to learn a lot.	The students are going back to school today. They will continue to learn a lot.

11 Towards fair portrayals

- **Avoid stories with stereotypes**, including openly sexist's interpretations of the characteristic and roles of women and men in society.
- Try **not to make gender based assumptions**, including in depiction of traditional “feminine/masculine characteristics and male/female roles.”
- Do not represent females and males as possessing **stereotypical gendered attributes and characteristics**.
- Make sure you include stories that show multi-dimensional representation/portrayal of men and women (indicating journalistic effort to challenge/counter challenge gender-based stereotypes).

12 Exercise: Writing your own introduction and headline

**Drunk woman driver
sentenced for killing male
pedestrian**

A woman who was known for her bouts of drinking and erratic driving was finally sentenced to six months jail, after she ran over a male pedestrian.

Now write your own headline and introduction.

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