



**RFL RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE GUIDE
LANGUAGE OF EQUALITY**

This document has been produced in response to anxieties people often have about what exactly are the appropriate terms to use when working with minority individuals or groups how can I be sure I will not cause offence? Language can often be a significant barrier to working with different communities and this guide aims to help you to use the most appropriate terms.

This is a detailed document but please don't be put off by this, it is divided into sections; general, gender, age, BME, LGBT and disability. There is also a quick guide which gives a summary of key points from this longer document.

It is important to acknowledge that a number of sources have been used to compile this document and the RFL has consulted with a range of organizations and individuals during the process of developing this guidance. A contact list of organisations that contributed to this document can be found at the end.

Language is never static and evolves over time and place and as such this will be an evolving document. Any comments or feedback will be gratefully accepted.

GENERAL

For most of us the spoken word, or language is our primary means of making ourselves understood. However it is important not to forget other means of communicating such as sign language. Body language and gestures also communicate meaning although these do not have universally agreed meanings as there are cultural and national differences. Some disabled people may not have complete control over their bodies thus making body language more difficult to interpret. Some disabled people may have body language that is more difficult to interpret but not impossible given time, patience and an open and flexible attitude. For many non disabled people it can be their own discomfort at not being able to understand and feel understood that can create barriers

Language is more than just communication; it is a powerful tool that shapes how we think, how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Language can be used to reinforce or perpetuate prejudice, discrimination and inequality or it can be used positively to challenge and create a more equal society.

It is important to remember that there can be a difference between what we mean to say or intend to mean and what our words mean to other people, sometimes this can lead to unintended offence and talking at cross purposes.

Language and meaning changes over time with new words entering our vocabulary at the same time language may also lag behind changes in society and norms and conventions for example, we continue to use terms such as 'the ordinary man in the street', the speaker is actually referring to everyone: men, women and children, however the phrase presumes that everyone on our streets is a man. Although this interpretation may not be intended it has the effect of rendering women invisible simply because we have not changed the language we use to reflect greater equality between men and women in today's society.

Britain has also become a multicultural society and as such many more people will not tolerate racist language or behaviours and have the confidence to challenge racism and choose to use more appropriate language. However racism has and continues to be a common experience for many BME communities. Everyday language contains hoards of negative and offensive - words and expressions on the subjects of race, colour and ethnicity.

Promoting a language of equality is not about politically correct language taken to extremes i.e. 'folically challenged' rather than bald! The Language of equality is about saying what we intend and want to mean, and by choosing our words more carefully it can help us to express what we want to see in practice: a society of equality based on dignity and respect.

GENDER AND LANGUAGE

- Gender Neutral Language

With a little thought and effort, it is easy to ensure that the language we use is not gender specific and includes everyone in any reference to people in general. For example chairman becomes chair, spokesman becomes spokesperson. If we start to think about what and how we say things and try harder to use inclusive gender neutral language then gradually language will change and terms like 'manning the phones' will not be used.

Greater equality of opportunity has meant that more men and women have entered professions and jobs traditionally associated with one gender where this happens there is a tendency to add a gender description to their role i.e. lady doctor, male nurse. This implies that the rightful owners of the title are from the other gender and that it is a bit odd that this person has that job. To avoid this simply use the job title unless it is important to identify the gender of the person.

- Parallel Language

Within sport, it is important that we give equal status to women in the game as we do for men. One way of doing that is to apply the same rules to both men and women. If we say womens rugby match then we should also say mens rugby match, whereas what generally happens is that if gender is not mentioned it is assumed we are talking about men or the mens game. To ensure that language is inclusive and equal, if feminine tags are used for the women's teams, masculine tags should also be used for the men's teams or no tags are used at all!

The same thing happens when talking about leagues or tournaments. I.e. when sports presenters and journalists talk about the Challenge Cup they are invariably talking about men's Rugby League events. Whereas when women's events are discussed their gender is mentioned specifically. I.e. Women's World Cup. To be equitable, again there should be consistent use of male and female tags, either used for both or not at all.

- "Girls, ladies, love and dear"

There are particular issues around the use of 'girl' i.e. women referred to as "the girls in the office". This is made even more confusing when many women refer to themselves as girls in the office. Generally no offence will be intended, or taken, but adult women should not be referred to as girls as this devalues or trivializes women.

Many people struggle with using the term woman as it almost seems impolite i.e. 'ask that woman for the time' compared to 'ask that lady for the time' it is even more difficult when terms such as 'ladies and gentlemen' are still in common use when addressing an audience. Again it is a matter of practice, eventually it will seem as natural to say woman as it does to say lady with the added advantage of not causing any offence. We could also take time to rethink our opening welcome and consider using welcome to all delegates/visitors etc which neatly avoids the problem of ladies and gentlemen.

Terms such as 'love', 'dear' and 'pet' may be considered offensive by some people, especially women, although sometimes as a result of regional language differences such phrases are commonly used to refer to both men and women. Within our professional lives it would be good practice to avoid using these terms thereby avoiding the risk of causing unintentional offense.

- **Forms of Address**

Today, the use of 'Ms' by women has become widespread as a preferred title which does not focus on whether someone is married or not. However, while many women now use 'Ms', others still use 'Miss' or 'Mrs'. If a woman's preference is not known, the simple solution is to ask, if this is not possible use the term Ms. Most importantly use the title she prefers.

There is a tendency for first names to be used when addressing women, in circumstances where men would be addressed by their titles. It is important that the same conventions are followed for both genders. Thus we would refer to 'Mr Khan and Ms Taylor' rather than 'Mr Khan and Karen Taylor'.

- **Husband, wife or partner**

If it is not known whether somebody is married, referring to their 'partner' is a more appropriate alternative to husband or wife as partner does not assume that someone is in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, or that they are married. Most importantly listen to the words used by that individual and respect their preference, if in doubt the simple solution is to ask.

- **Transgender**

Particular sensitivity is needed in supporting individuals undergoing gender reassignment. This is a lengthy emotionally and physically demanding process. When a person is undergoing this process they should be referred to as the gender and name by which they wish to be known and should not be subject to harassment or abuse.

AGE

- **Age Neutral Terminology**

Where it is necessary to make reference to age, it is better to use neutral terms such as 'older people' when referring to people; services for older people, elderly relatives, older workers or elders (this term is often used amongst Minority Ethnic communities). Ideally check what terms are appropriate to the individual or service provider.

Just as language evolves, so do social formalities it is particularly important that we only address older people by their forename if and when invited to do so as to use their forename uninvited may be seen as a lack of respect.

Equally 'youth' has connotations of inexperience, impetuosity, and unreliability or even dishonesty. If it is necessary to make reference to a person's age it is better to use the neutral term 'young people' particularly when referring to teenagers as to be described as a child, kid, youth or youngster could be seen as demeaning.

BME

- **Power of language**

Sporting Equals recognises that words can reinforce beliefs and prejudices but crucially words can also be used to challenge racism. As such, it is important that we use acceptable terminology when referring to people from black and minority ethnic communities. The terminology used to define different ethnic communities varies between organisations and individuals across the UK and terminology is often adjusted in order to communicate more effectively with different audiences.

- **Ethnic Minority / Black and minority ethnic (BME)**

These terms are commonly used in public policy and in voluntary services. Minority ethnic is preferred to ethnic minority because it stresses that everyone belongs to an ethnic group. The CRE advised that either term is acceptable but decide on your own house style and remain consistent in usage. It is also important to recognise that in some areas the white community may be the minority ethnic community

- **Ethnic /ethnicity**

Refers to all cultural groups and does not only refer to Black communities, all people have ethnicity so that white people are also part of particular ethnic groups. When planning to work with a range of ethnic groups do not forget that each geographical area will comprise of many different community groups for example Eastern European, refugee and asylum seekers, gypsies and traveler communities should be included.

- **African, Caribbean and/or African-Caribbean**

African-Caribbean has replaced the term Afro-Caribbean to refer to Caribbean peoples and those of Caribbean origin who are of African descent. There is now a view that the term should not be hyphenated due to the differences between people of African and Caribbean origins, instead they should be referred to separately. African, Caribbean or African Caribbean are all terms that are acceptable to use, however it is also important to recognise that African and /or Caribbean can be seen as too general a term that does not reflect the immense diversity among African or Caribbean countries in terms of language, religion and faith, culture, economic status, or political persuasion to name but a few. Where possible ask the individual what they prefer, for example someone may prefer to be described as from St Kitts, rather than Caribbean or African Caribbean. Another may prefer to be referred to as Nigerian or Egyptian rather than African.

- **Asian/South Asian**

In the UK Asian generally refers to people from the Asian sub-continent: namely, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir although as with the African and Caribbean communities it may not always be appropriate to group together such a wide variety of different cultural and ethnic groups. Again it is preferable to ask the individual how they want to refer to their ethnicity, they may be happy to use the term Asian, on the other hand they may prefer Bangladeshi. The term South Asian is more precise and Asian on its own should not be used if it risks confusing South Asian people with those from other parts of Asia, such as Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese people.

- **Black**

Black is a term that is often used politically to refer to people of African, Caribbean and South Asian origin. It implies solidarity against racism and reclaims black as a source of pride and identity in opposition to the many negative connotations relating to the word "black" in the English language i.e. black leg, black list etc. In the UK however, there is an on-going debate about the use of this term to define Asian and South Asian peoples some of whom object to the use of the word "black" being applied to them. The simple solution is where possible and appropriate ask the individual what they prefer. Coloured should be avoided as it is generally viewed as offensive to many black people in the UK however this is not the case in the USA where people of colour is a term that is also used.

- **British**

Some members of particular ethnic groups may object to being referred to by their “country of origin” when they have been living for several generations in Britain. Thus ‘Black British’, ‘British Asian’ and ‘Chinese British’ are becoming more common ways to refer to second and third generation people, many of whom were born in Britain. In order to avoid offense or making assumptions around the idea of “British” we should also remember that this can imply a false sense of unity as indeed many Scots, Welsh and Irish resist being identified as British. Again the simple solution is to ask what the individual prefers.

- **Immigrants and refugees**

Under some circumstances people could correctly be described as immigrants - if they are in-migrants from one place to another. However, this is not a useful term for referring to ethnic groups which have been in Britain since the early post-war period. Refugee refers specifically to a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

- **Mixed race / dual heritage**

Ideally dual heritage or mixed parentage are the preferred terms to use today rather than mixed race. The term mixed race can be misleading as it implies that a “pure” race exists. It is also important to recognise that within BME communities themselves the term mixed race is used. It is unlikely that offence will be taken from using mixed race however it would be good practice to try and use dual heritage or mixed parentage instead. Half-Caste is no longer an acceptable term and should be avoided.

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL & TRANSGENDER (LGBT)

- **Heterosexism**

Heterosexism is when Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people can be excluded by language and behaviour which assumes everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior and preferred i.e. automatically saying “what is his name?” when referring to or asking about a woman’s partner.

- **Appropriate language**

There are many words and phrases that are used to refer to sexual orientation in derogatory ways. To avoid any misunderstanding people should stick to using the words lesbian, gay or bisexual, even though they may hear LGB people choosing to speak about themselves differently.

- **Gay**

On the whole, the word gay can be taken as referring to both men and women, as in the Gay Olympics. However, it is more commonly used to describe men than women. By referring only to ‘gay people’ or the ‘gay community’ this may exclude or render invisible lesbians. In order to overcome this, try and refer to ‘lesbian, gay and bisexual people’; this includes women who prefer the term gay, as well as gay men.

However some women may refer to themselves as gay women rather than as lesbians. If you are working with an individual, and you need to refer to their sexual orientation, but are unsure, the best guide is to ask politely what word the person prefers and make certain that they are comfortable having this referred to before going any further.

- “Lifestyle choices”

As generally, it is not suggested that heterosexual people make a “choice” to be straight - it is important to recognise that the same applies to lesbian, gay and bisexual people so do not use phrases which imply that sexual orientation is a lifestyle choice.

- Bisexuality

It is important to be aware that people who are bisexual may not wish to be presumed heterosexual, any more than do lesbians or gay men. If an individual who identifies as bisexual is currently in a relationship with a person of the opposite sex or not in a relationship at the time they would still not want an assumption made that they are heterosexual. It is important therefore to use the phrase “lesbian, gay and bisexual people” because this is more inclusive.

- Homosexual

The term ‘homosexual’ is rarely used by the gay community because it was the term used by health professionals who defined lesbian, gay and bisexual people as having a mental illness and as such is often seen as a derogatory term. However people of different generations may use different language to define their sexual orientation. For example, some older people may define themselves as homosexual rather than gay or lesbian because this is the word they are familiar with. It is important to refer to a persons sexual orientation then ask the person what term they prefer to be used.

- Being ‘out’ and ‘outed’

Process by which LGBT people choose to reveal their sexuality, this is an ongoing, often daily process with an actual or perceived high risk of resulting homophobic comments. If someone ‘outs’ themselves to you, appreciate the level of trust and confidence that the individual has placed in you by sharing that information and never share this information with anyone else without the expressed permission of the individual concerned.

DISABILITY

- Disabled people vs. people with disability

Disabled people / person /spectator is the preferred term and the term used by the RFL as this reflect the social model of disability which emphasises that people with impairments are disabled by society not by their impairment. For example “Wheelchair users can’t use the facilities because the venue is inaccessible; therefore, we need to modify the building and the services we provide.”

The social model was not developed as some form of “denial” of impairment, it was developed in order to inform society, which includes disabled people, of the real reason that individuals are not able or allowed to take a full and active role in society.

It follows then, if society in general, organisations and those individuals working within them acknowledge, understand and implement the ‘social model’, there would be far less discrimination against disabled people and greater access to services and the society as a whole.

Person with a disability is a medical model perspective which implies a person's impairment or medical condition causes the disability. You firmly attach the disability to the person with this phrase when it's not it's with society. For example "Wheelchair users can't use the facilities because of their impairment, as it prevents them from getting up the steps at the entrance of the venue".

You will come across many people, disabled and non-disabled, who use language we advocate avoiding i.e. people with disabilities. Firstly they may not know about the social model but also may choose to be referred to in a particular way. Where it is not appropriate to challenge (sometimes it will be) promote the use of preferred terminology through your own use and certainly in any marketing material that is produced.

Terms that are not acceptable and considered offensive;

There are many terms that have been used to describe people with disabilities which are now considered unacceptable. As a general rule disabled person should replace all terms such as handicapped, invalid or crippled. Specific disabilities should be referred to by their correct terminology i.e. person with learning disability not retarded, speech and language difficulty not dumb, hearing or visual impairment not deaf or blind. Suffers from ...should never be used as it infers and reinforces notions of pity, rather than autonomy, independence and power. Replace with "Bill has Downs Syndrome", rather than "Bill suffers from Downs Syndrome".

- Non-disabled, normal and able bodied

If there is an absolute need to define people in this way as a preference someone without a disability should be referred to as "non-disabled". Normal should not be used as implies disabled people are not normal. Able-bodied is not necessarily as contentious or offensive, but it is inaccurate as it presumes that all disabled people are not able-bodied. People with a learning disability, for example, may not have a physical disability, and therefore are able-bodied.

- Accessible rather than disabled...

When referring to facilities for people with disabilities use accessible rather than disabled toilets, parking, entrance should be used, after all what is a disabled toilet?! Advertising tickets should be phrased as tickets for disabled spectators not disabled tickets!

- Basic consideration: Talk to the person

Whether in or out of the sporting setting there are some very simple suggestions that will help avoid giving offense. If a disabled person is accompanied by someone remember it might be their partner or friend, don't assume they are a carer or personal assistant.

Address the person you are talking to, and if that is the disabled person then talk to them, ask them the questions; if the person accompanying them is there to support them, then they will lend their support in an appropriate manner (i.e. signing, clarifying, and interpreting, etc). Above all avoid doing things like directing conversation and questions to the person accompanying them and saying "will s/he want to participate...?" as this assumes they must be incapable of communication, instead - ask the person! Additionally, when you do communicate with disabled people ensure you do so in a manner which is appropriate to that person, and allow them sufficient time to provide you with a response (i.e. don't finish their sentences or assume that they are going to give you a particular response in a specific format.)

TOP TIPS FOR GETTING LANGUAGE RIGHT

- It is important to promote preferred positive language and terminology but not get bogged down with it.
- Be consistent in use and make sure you follow RFL guidelines where there are variations in language possible.
- You will come across many people, who use language we advocate avoiding. Firstly they may not know the correct language to use but also may choose to be referred to in a particular way. You might hear terms used between members of minority groups but that does not mean that it is OK for you to use those terms. Where it is not appropriate to challenge (sometimes it will be) promote the use of preferred terminology through your own use and certainly in any marketing material that is produced.
- Listen to how person refers to themselves and take the lead from them. If in doubt ask what term they would prefer.
- Don't make assumptions i.e. assume all women are Mrs. or that a man's partner is necessarily a woman or that by looking at a person you can tell their nationality, religion or sexuality.
- Avoid using 'us' and 'them' when discussing 'other' communities.
- Of course we will get it wrong sometimes, after all this can be a good way to learn. However what is important is that we learn from our experiences and do not become "defensive" when somebody has told us their preference. One way would be to just say sorry and leave it at that. Always remember that if somebody is willing to tell you and you then react adversely, you could give the message that you do not care about what the person thinks or feels, which is usually the opposite of what we want to portray.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

[Equality Standard for Sport newsletter](#)

If you would like to subscribe to this very informative newsletter then email roger@vagaassociates.com

[Commissions for Equality & Human Rights \(CEHR\)](#) champions equality and human rights for all, working to eliminate discrimination, reduce inequality, protect human rights and to build good relations, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to participate in society. www.equalityhumanrights.com

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[Sporting Equals](#) (works with BME communities in sport)

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[Women sport & fitness foundation](#)

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