European Parliament

GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE
in the European Parliament

FOREWORD

In 2008, the European Parliament was one of the first international organisations to adopt multilingual guidelines on gender-neutral language. I am pleased that, since then, many other institutions and organisations have adopted similar guidance. On the occasion of the 10 year anniversary of the guidelines, and in order to reflect linguistic and cultural developments, the High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity requested Parliament's services to update the gender-neutral language guidelines, which provide practical advice in all official languages on the use of gender-fair and inclusive language.

On behalf of the High-Level Group, I very much welcome this updated edition of the gender-neutral language guidelines which is the fruit of a close collaboration among the relevant linguistic and administrative services.

The European Parliament remains as committed as ever to the use of gender-neutral language in its written and spoken communications and I now invite the relevant services to raise awareness of the updated guidelines and the importance of their use in parliamentary publications and communications.

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WHAT IS GENDER NEUTRALITY IN LANGUAGE?

Gender-neutral language is a generic term covering the use of non-sexist language, inclusive language or gender-fair language. The purpose of gender-neutral language is to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex or social gender is the norm. Using gender-fair and inclusive language also helps reduce gender stereotyping, promotes social change and contributes to achieving gender equality.

Gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language is more than a matter of political correctness. Language powerfully reflects and influences attitudes, behaviour and perceptions.

In order to treat all genders equally, efforts have been employed since the 1980s to propose a gender-neutral/gender-fair/non-sexist use of language, so that no gender is privileged, and prejudices against any gender are not perpetuated.

As part of those efforts, over the last decade, numerous guidelines have been developed and implemented at international and national level. International and European institutions (such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the International Labour Organisation, the European Parliament and the European Commission), professional associations, universities, major news agencies and publications have adopted guidelines for the non-sexist use of language, either as separate documents or as specific recommendations included in their style guides. In the European Union, many Member States have also debated language policies and proposed such guidelines at various levels.

GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE
IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

1. GENERAL CONTEXT

The principle of gender equality and non-discrimination on gender grounds is firmly rooted in the Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and it has been endorsed by the European Parliament on many occasions. The language used in Parliament should therefore reflect this.

To this end, the aim of these guidelines is to ensure that, as far as possible, non-sexist and gender-inclusive language is used also in the Parliament's documents and communications in all official languages.

The purpose of these guidelines is not to constrain authors in the European Parliament to follow a mandatory set of rules but rather to encourage the administrative services to give due consideration to the issue of gender sensitivity in language whenever writing, translating or interpreting.

It must of course be underlined that translators are required to render texts faithfully and accurately in their own language. If an author intentionally uses gender-specific language, the translation will respect that intention. This makes it all the more important for authors of texts in Parliament to be fully aware of the principles of gender-neutral language.

As far as interpreting is concerned, Parliament's services are fully committed to using gender-neutral language and embracing the associated principles of non-discrimination, recognition and equality. Consequently, these guidelines are made readily available online and form part of an interpreter's meeting preparation. While interpreters are aware of gender-neutral language standards in their working languages, there are certain constraints, such as the high speed at which speeches are delivered, the need to respect the speaker's authorship and intentions, avoiding editorial interference, as well as the specific features of the spoken as opposed to the written language, which can make it occasionally difficult to incorporate gender-neutral language in simultaneous interpreting, a very fast-paced and highly intensive activity.

2. PARLIAMENT'S SPECIFICITIES

These guidelines must reflect two particular features of Parliament's work: first, its multilingual working environment and, second, its role as a European legislator.

(a) Multilingual context

In the multilingual environment of the European Parliament, the principles of gender neutrality in language and gender-inclusive language require the use of different strategies in the various official languages, depending on the grammatical typology of each language.

As far as grammatical gender is expressed in the official languages of the Union, a distinction can be made between three types of languages and the accompanying strategies to achieve gender neutrality:

- **Natural gender languages** (such as Danish, English and Swedish), where personal nouns are mostly gender-neutral and there are personal pronouns specific for each gender. The general trend here is to reduce as much as possible the use of gender-specific terms. In these languages, the linguistic strategy most usually used is neutralisation. In order to avoid gender references, one can use gender-neutral terms, i.e. words that are not gender-specific and refer to people in general, with no reference to women or men (*'chairman'* is replaced by *'Chair'* or *'chairperson'*, *'policeman'* or *'policewoman'* by *'police officer'*, *'spokesman'* by *'spokesperson'*, *'stewardess'* by *'flight attendant'*, *'headmaster'* or *'headmistress'* by *'director'* or *'principal'*, etc.). This gender-neutral trend has led to the disappearance of the older female forms, with the previous male form becoming unisex (e.g. '*actor*' instead of '*actress*'). Gender-inclusive language is also used, replacing, for example, *'he'* as a generic reference by the terms *'he or she'*.

- **Grammatical gender languages** (such as German, Romance languages and Slavic languages), where every noun has a grammatical gender and the gender of personal pronouns usually matches the reference noun. As it is almost impossible, from a lexical point of view, to create widely accepted gender-neutral forms from existing words in those languages, alternative approaches have been sought and recommended in administrative and political language.

Feminisation (i.e. the use of feminine correspondents of masculine terms or the use of both terms) is an approach that has become increasingly used in these languages, in particular in professional contexts, such as job titles when referring to women. Because most occupations have been, by tradition, grammatically masculine, with only a few exceptions, typically for traditionally feminine jobs such as 'nurse' or 'midwife', the feeling of discrimination has been particularly strong. Therefore female equivalents started to be created and increasingly used for virtually all functions of masculine gender ('*Kanzlerin*', '*présidente*', '*sénatrice*', '*assessora*', etc.). Also, replacing the generic masculine with double forms for specific referents ('*tutti i consiglieri e tutte le consigliere*') has gained acceptance in many languages.

Thus, the use of generic masculine terms is no longer the absolute practice, even in legislative acts. For example, in the German version of the Treaty of Lisbon, the generic term 'citizens' appears also as '*Unionsbürgerinnen und Unionsbürger*'.

- **Genderless languages** (such as Estonian, Finnish and Hungarian), where there is no grammatical gender and no pronominal gender. Those languages do not generally need a particular strategy to be gender-inclusive, save for the very specific cases that are discussed in the particular guidelines for those languages.

(b) The European Parliament as a legislator

The way in which the principle of gender sensitivity in language is reflected in a text also depends heavily on the type and register of the text involved.

Authors should be careful to ensure that the solution chosen is appropriate for the type of text and the future uses to which it will be put, while also ensuring sufficient visibility for all genders intended.

For example, what may be appropriate in a speech ('*Ladies and Gentlemen*') or a direct form of address ('*Dear Sir or Madam*' at the top of a letter) will not necessarily meet the formal constraints of legislation, which must be clear, simple, precise and consistent, and does not lend itself well to certain drafting solutions aimed at gender neutrality that might create ambiguity as to the obligations contained in the text (such as the alternation of masculine and feminine forms for the generic pronoun or use of only the feminine form in some documents and only the masculine in others).

While respecting the need for clarity, the use of a language that is not gender inclusive, in particular the generic masculine, should be avoided as far as possible in legislative acts. Many legislative bodies in the Member States have already adopted recommendations going in this direction.

ISSUES COMMON TO MOST LANGUAGES

Although the specific ways to avoid sexist language vary from one language to another, a number of the following issues are common to most languages.

1. GENERIC USE OF THE MASCULINE GENDER

The traditional grammatical convention in most grammatical gender languages is that for groups combining both sexes, the masculine gender is used as the 'inclusive' or 'generic' form, whereas the feminine is 'exclusive', i.e. referring to women only. This generic or neutralising use of the masculine gender has often been perceived as discriminating against women.

Most grammatical gender languages have developed their own strategies to avoid such generic use. Relevant strategies are described in the specific guidelines at the end of this booklet. Solutions that reduce the readability of a text, such as combined forms ('s/he', 'him/her'), should be avoided.

In addition, the use in many languages of the word 'man' in a wide range of idiomatic expressions which refer to both men and women, such as *manpower*, *layman*, *man-made*, *statesmen*, *committee of wise men*, should be discouraged. With increased awareness, such expressions can usually be made gender-neutral.

By combining various strategies (see the specific guidelines), it should be possible, in most cases, to apply the principle of gender neutrality and fairness in Parliament's texts.

2. NAMES OF PROFESSIONS AND FUNCTIONS

When referring to **functions** in Parliament's texts, generic terms are used in natural gender languages and in genderless languages, while the masculine form may be used by way of exception in grammatical gender languages (e.g. '*chaque député ne peut soutenir qu'une candidature*').

If the gender of the person is relevant to the point being made, or when referring to **individual persons**, gender-specific terms should be used, in particular in grammatical gender languages (e.g. '*la haute représentante de l'Union pour les affaires étrangères et la politique de sécurité*'). Generally speaking, a person's own wishes as to how he or she would like to be addressed or referred to, should be respected (e.g. '*Madame le Président*' or '*Madame la Présidente*').

Notices of vacancies should be drafted in a gender-inclusive way in order to encourage both male and female candidates to apply.

3. USE OF TITLES

In some languages (for example French and German), titles such as '*Madame*', '*Mademoiselle*', '*Frau*' or '*Fräulein*' originally indicated the marital status of the woman to whom the title applied. This has changed over the years and the use of those titles no longer reflects such status. Administrative practice is following this trend. The title '*Mademoiselle*' is for example progressively being deleted from administrative forms in French-speaking countries, leaving only the choice between 'Madame' and 'Monsieur'. In Parliament's texts, titles such as '*Monsieur*', '*Frau*', '*Ms*', etc. are most often simply dropped in favour of the person's full name.

CONCLUSIONS

Parliament is committed to gender equality and non-discrimination on gender grounds. The use of gender-sensitive language is one of the ways of implementing this commitment. The many languages and cultures represented in Parliament mean that there is no "one size fits all" solution in this regard, but that appropriate solutions must be sought in each specific context, taking into account the relevant linguistic and cultural parameters. Practical solutions for English can be found in the second part of these guidelines.

Parliament's role as a European legislator also must be taken into consideration when seeking to achieve gender-neutral language. Not all solutions that could otherwise be applied can be used in the context of legislation, which requires clarity, simplicity, precision and consistency.

> Bias-free language has more chance of being accepted by users if it is natural and unobtrusive. Genuinely neutral and inclusive alternatives should be sought while respecting the multilingual nature of Parliament's working environment and the specific rules governing the drafting of legislation. These guidelines aim at being a source of inspiration for the administrative services of Parliament in this regard.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES FOR ENGLISH

English occupies a particular position within the European Parliament, since the majority of original documents in this language are drafted by authors who are not native speakers. Moreover, English, unlike French and Spanish, for example, lacks a body which sets linguistic norms to be applied and gender-neutral language guidelines existing at a national level in one Anglophone country are not necessarily applicable in another.

Those in the European Parliament who draft in English, edit English or translate into English are therefore best advised to use gender-neutral language that is acceptable to the international stakeholder community of English users in general, and to Parliament's intended English-using public in particular.

1.   GENERIC USE OF 'MAN'

Avoid the generic use of '*man*' and its derivatives

Alternatives: humanity (for mankind), staff (for manpower), a French person (for Frenchman)/the French or French people (for Frenchmen), synthetic or artificial (for man-made), advisory panel (for committee of wise men), political leaders (for statesmen).

2.   GENERIC USE OF 'HE',' HIS', ETC.

Complete rephrasing may sometimes be necessary. Instead of, for example, 'the official shall carry out his duties':
- **Use plural forms** ('*officials shall carry out their duties ...*')
- **Use the imperative** ('*please send your CV to ...*')
- **Omit the pronoun** altogether ('*an official's salary is dependent on ~~his~~ length of service*')
- **Use the passive** ('*the relevant documents should be sent to ...*')

If none of the above strategies work, **use '*he or she'*,** but do so sparingly and avoid repeating it more than once in the same sentence.

Avoid combined forms such as '*he/she*', '*him/her*', '*s/he*'
Avoid alternating masculine and feminine forms

In formal contexts (legislative acts, Rules of Procedure) it may not always be possible to avoid the occasional generic use of 'he' or 'his', but strenuous efforts should be made to reduce such use to a minimum.

In the specific case of Parliament's Rules of Procedure, as it is particularly difficult to ensure gender neutrality when referring to the President (where the use of plural is not an option), one possible solution might be to adapt the Rules as required when a new President is elected.

3. GENERIC USE OF 'THEY'

There is an increasing tendency to use '*they*' and its derivatives in certain contexts for a singular subject, thus not specifying the person's gender, as in: '*Someone may not know their tax number*'. This may be considered acceptable, though caution should be exercised when it comes to the reflexive/emphatic form: should one accept '*Someone may unintentionally cause harm to themselves*'? In such cases '*themself*' is a possible neologism, but does not appear to be established as yet, although this may evolve. For the moment and if there is no alternative, use '*themselves*'.

4. TITLES

Use '*Mr*' for a man; '*Ms*' for a woman, avoiding '*Miss*' and '*Mrs*', unless it is known that the person referred to specifically wants to be referred to by one of those titles; use '*Dr*' for both genders (in the sense both of '*medical doctor*' and '*Ph.D.*'); use '*Professor*' (abbreviation: '*Prof.*') for both genders.

5. NAMES OF PROFESSIONS AND FUNCTIONS

Use gender-neutral job titles

Generally in English, it is by now long-established that words like '*doctor*' or '*lawyer*' refer to a professional of either sex (without '*woman*', '*lady*' or '*female*' tacked on the front). In some cases a substitute is available ('*firefighters*', '*flight attendants*', '*athletes*'), but it is still normal to use '*fisherman*', '*midwife*', and some other gender-specific terms. A list of recommendations is set out in the Appendix.

Use '*Chair*' instead of '*Chairman*'

'Chairperson' should be avoided, as the tendency has been to use it only when referring to women. 'Chair' should be used consistently for both sexes (for example, the Conference of Committee Chairs).

Use '*press officer*' or paraphrase: '*a representative for ...*' or '*speaking for …*' or (sparingly) use '*spokesman*' or '*spokeswoman*', depending on the actual sex of the specific person concerned.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDED NAMES OF PROFESSIONS AND FUNCTIONS

It is generally not difficult to find a gender-neutral term for professions, occupations, functions, etc. in English, although there are some exceptions.
The following is a non-binding list of recommendations, with alternatives where relevant.

- Ñ Actor/actress (actor is now commonly used for both genders; use actress if the person's gender is relevant)
- Ñ Administrator (for both genders)
- Ñ Ambassador (for both genders)
- Ñ Architect (for both genders)
- Ñ Assistant (for both genders)
- Ñ Attaché (as in 'cultural attaché - also use for women attachés, attachée does not appear to exist)
- Ñ Author (not authoress)
- Ñ Business person/executive (plural: business people) (not businessman; businesswoman only if the person's gender is being stressed; alternatively and in plural contexts, use business circles or business milieux)
- Ñ Commissioner (for both genders)
- Ñ Director, Director-General (for both genders)
- Ñ Doctor (for both genders - avoid lady/woman doctor)
- Ñ Editor (for both genders)
- Ñ Engineer (for both genders)
- Ñ Firefighter (not fireman)
- Ñ Fisherman/fishermen ('fisher' and 'fisherfolk' are not widely accepted)
- Ñ Flight attendant or (in plural) flight crew (not air hostess or stewardess)
- Ñ Head/head teacher (of primary or secondary school; not headmaster/headmistress)
- Ñ Intern (for both genders)
- Ñ Interpreter (for both genders)
- Ñ Journalist (for both genders)
- Ñ Judge (for both genders)
- Ñ Lawyer (for both genders)
- Ñ Layperson (plural: lay people; not layman/laymen)
- Ñ Lecturer (for both genders)
- Ñ Manager (not manageress)
- Ñ Mayor (not mayoress)
- Ñ Midwife (for both genders; there is no accepted alternative for male midwives)
- Ñ Nurse (for both genders; avoid male nurse)
- Ñ Official (for both genders)
- Ñ Police officer (not policeman/policewoman unless the officer's gender is relevant)
- Ñ Politician (for both genders)

- President (for both genders)
- Priest (only use 'woman priest' if relevant; 'priestess' only in a historical context, e.g. ancient Rome)
- Prime minister (for both genders)
- Professor (for both genders)
- Rector (of university; for a UK university, vice-chancellor)
- Sales representative (not salesman)
- Scientist (for both genders)
- Speaker (for both genders)
- Teacher (for both genders)
- Technician (for both genders)
- Trainee (for both genders)
- Translator (for both genders)
- Usher (in whatever context; in a cinema, not usherette)
- Waiter/waitress (no gender-neutral term has been successfully proposed)
- Weather reporter/forecaster (not weatherman)
- Writer (for both genders)