

How to....Adopt SOGIESC Inclusive Language

Language is often not neutral. In humanitarian settings, the words we use to describe and address displaced LGBTQIA+ persons carry real consequences, for safety, dignity, access to services, and trust. Using the wrong terminology can exclude, harm, or endanger the very people we aim to protect. Using the right terminology signals respect, builds rapport, and reinforces the organisation's commitment to human rights.

- **Words can protect or endanger:** Using incorrect or stigmatising language can 'out' individuals, expose them to harm, or deter them from seeking help.
- **Terminology shapes organisational culture:** The language used in policies, and daily communication reflects and reinforces the values of an organisation.
- **Context determines appropriateness:** Terms accepted in one country or community may be stigmatising or dangerous in another. There is no universal standard.
- **Displacement adds complexity:** Refugees and IDPs from different cultural contexts may not identify with Western LGBTQIA+ terminology.
- **Safeguarding depends on accurate language:** Imprecise terminology in protection documentation can invalidate claims, misdirect referrals, and cause institutional harm.

Practical Steps for Aid Organisations

1. Terminology: Definitions and Guidance

SOGIESC refers to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics. This is the preferred framework in humanitarian and human rights contexts because it is inclusive, and recognises the full spectrum of human diversity.

Sexual Orientation: A person's enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction. Includes heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and other orientations.

Gender Identity: A person's internal sense of their own gender, whether man, woman, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, or another identity.

Gender Expression: The external presentation of gender through clothing, behaviour, and other markers.

Sex Characteristics: The physical attributes that characterise biological sex, including chromosomes, hormones, anatomy, and reproductive organs. Intersex persons are born with variations in these characteristics.

The acronym LGBTQIA+ brings together a broad community of identities. Understanding what each term means, and what it does not mean, is essential for accurate and respectful communication.

Lesbian: A woman who is primarily attracted to other women. In some contexts, non-binary persons attracted to women may also use this term. Note: 'homosexual woman' is outdated and should be avoided.

Gay: Broadly used for people attracted to the same gender. Most commonly used by men who are attracted to men, but some women and non-binary persons also use it. Avoid conflating 'gay' with all LGBTQIA+ identities.

Bisexual: A person attracted to people of their own gender and other genders. Bisexuality does not require equal attraction to all genders, nor does it imply promiscuity. Bi-erasure (denying bisexual identities) is harmful.

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. Includes trans men, trans women, and non-binary or genderqueer persons. 'Transgender' is an adjective—never 'a transgender'. Avoid 'transgendered'.

Queer: A reclaimed umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities. In many communities, it is affirming and preferred. In others—particularly older generations or conservative contexts—it retains a derogatory history. Always follow individual preference.

Intersex: A person born with physical sex characteristics (chromosomes, anatomy, hormones) that do not fit typical definitions of male or female. Intersex is about biological variation, not gender identity or sexual orientation. Intersex persons face specific medical and human rights issues that are distinct.

Asexual: A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction to others. Asexuality exists on a spectrum (including demisexual, graysexual) and does not preclude romantic attraction or relationships.

+ (Plus): Represents identities not captured in the main acronym, including pansexual, non-binary, genderfluid, agender, two-spirit (Indigenous North American context), and others. Avoid using '+' as shorthand for 'and so on'—it represents real people with distinct experiences.

2. When Community Members Don't Use LGBTQIA+ Terms

Many displaced persons may not recognise or identify with Western LGBTQIA+ terminology, even if their experiences clearly align with those identities. This does not invalidate their protection needs.

- Never impose identity labels. A person does not need to identify as 'gay' or 'transgender' or another identity to receive protection and assistance.
- Use the person's own language. If a person uses a culturally specific term, honour that language in interpersonal communication, while being mindful of documentation safety.
- Train interpreters carefully. Interpreters must understand both accurate SOGIESC terminology and its cultural equivalents, and must be vetted for attitude. An unsupportive interpreter can deter disclosure entirely.

3. How to Ask for Pronouns

- Normalise the practice by sharing your own pronouns first: *'My name is [name] and I use she/her pronouns. What pronouns do you use?'*
- Frame it as routine, not exceptional. Asking everyone not just people who appear gender non-conforming, destigmatises the practice.
- If uncertain in a group setting, use gender-neutral language until you have the information: 'everyone', 'colleagues', 'persons of concern', 'participants'.

Mistakes happen. How you respond matters more than the mistake itself.

- Correct yourself immediately and briefly.
- If a colleague misgenders someone, gently correct them. Create a culture where correction is normal.

Additional Resources

- **The PRIDE Centre:** Templates, legal analysis, and tools for [LGBTQIA+ inclusion](#) in humanitarian settings.

☒ Checklist for Organizing Pride in Restrictive Environments

- ☐ Understand SOGIESC so that staff can define and apply Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics.
- ☐ Pronoun protocols in place: Staff know how to ask for preferred pronouns and how to use they/them correctly.
- ☐ Documentation reviewed: All registration, assessment, and forms include gender-neutral options and are free of harmful language.
- ☐ Consent-based SOGIESC recording: Staff are trained to obtain informed consent before recording SOGIESC identity information.
- ☐ Interpreters are vetted and briefed: All interpreters used in SOGIESC-sensitive interviews are vetted and trained on appropriate terminology.
- ☐ Terminology training delivered: All staff have received SOGIESC terminology training.
- ☐ Annual terminology review: A process is in place to review and update organisational terminology standards at least once per year.
- ☐ **Share Resources:** Direct staff to [The PRIDE Centre](#) for information and guidance.

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