



The Office of the Auditor General is pleased to announce that it has adopted the OLACEFS guidelines for gender-neutral language.

This is a part of its initiative to create an adaptive and inclusive organization that not only drives for success but also the individual growth of its staff.

This manual was presented to staff on April 4th, 2025, and was well acknowledged and well accepted by staff.

As the Auditor General of Belize, I am proud to endorse this policy.

2025

THE POWER OF WORDS:
OLACEFS' GUIDELINE FOR GENDER-NEUTRAL
LANGUAGE

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Prologue

The Organization of Latin American and Caribbean Supreme Audit Institutions (**OLACEFS**) SAI members have been innovative for a variety of reasons. For some time now OLACEFS started to tread with purpose the road towards the mainstream of a gender perspective and non-discrimination, not only in the endeavours of our organization but also all SAI members that comprise it.

The working group on Gender Equality and Non-discrimination (GTG) of OLACEFS in compliance with the Gender Equality and Non-discrimination Policy, presents this Guide, which proposes to take into consideration the meaning of the messages we aspire to convey, how we desire to communicate them and -above all- to whom they are addressed.

Contemplating a gender-inclusive, and diversity perspective in the efforts of SAIS is not only a matter of equality but also complying with the standards of public integrity. And so forth, we contribute to strengthening peaceful and fair institutions without leaving anyone behind.

And it is not by chance that this guide is launched on the International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls (November 25).

Language possesses power and is imperative we use it to represent society and reflect its diversity.

Jorge Bermúdez Soto

Comptroller General of the Republic of Chile

Chairman of the Working Group on Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination - GTG

OLACEFS

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The power of words: A Guideline for gender-neutral language

Promoting and Respecting the Principle of Equality and Non-discrimination is the foundation for the Policy on Gender Equality and Non-discrimination (GTG¹) of the Latin American and Caribbean Organization of Supreme Audits (OLACEFS). The present document was approved at the XXX OLACEFS General Assembly of 2021.

The Policy on Gender Equality and Non-discrimination offers a unique opportunity for strengthening the Organization's work by contributing to substantive equality, accelerating transversality in the gender perspective, as well as, establishing inclusion, respect for human rights, equality, and non-discrimination as intersecting purposes in all Member SAIs. Considering this framework, the present document is based on the recommendations of the GTG Policy regarding the Gender, Inclusion, and Diversity Observatory (GID), which is the methodological coordinator of the process, studies, and working documents, as well as the leader of promoting initiatives implemented.

Among the recommendations of the policy, one is 'to sensitize SAI staff on the importance of the use of neutral and inclusive language'². In particular, it is recommended by the axis of culture organization that OLACEFS 'develops a guide for the use of inclusive non-sexist language which favours gender equality, diversity, and inclusion'³.

This guide was originally developed in a participatory manner through focus groups, meetings, and workshops by relevant OLACEFS stakeholders, GTG focal points, and Civil Society participants. For more information and details on methodology [here](#). We have adapted the original guide as a means of meeting the needs of English-speaking members of OLACEFS in writing formal documents and interacting with colleagues in neutral languages in the workplace.

¹ <https://olacefs.com/gtg/politica-de-genero/>

² OLACEFS (2021) Política sobre Igualdad de Género y No Discriminación, recomendación transversal V, pág. 31.

³ OLACEFS (2021) Política sobre Igualdad de Género y No Discriminación, recomendación 2.15, pág. 47.

What is gender-neutral language?

Language is an elaborated system of communication capable of transmitting any type of message using signs and symbols. When communicating, we share ideas, beliefs and doctrines, judgments, customs, or even values that shape our perception of reality, as well as various imaginaries and archetypes transferred individually and collectively. Through language, we establish our current perceptions and our actions, hence with our words we are able to educate and create new realities for our societies.

Viewed in this way, Language is dynamic, it's constantly changing, but it's also versatile in terms of how you can use it. Either through verbal language⁴ that includes oral⁵, written⁶, and iconic language⁷ or through non-verbal language⁸ that encompasses body language⁹, paralanguage¹⁰, and haptics¹¹ or proxemics¹². The use of these forms of communication allows for expressing a message or interpretation while differentiating it from another.

Several aspects of inequality are rooted in language, not only within language's network of significance but also in how these phenomena is reproduced in daily communication; some terms, ideas, or even words can exclude certain groups of people, or emphasize the hierarchy between people resulting in further marginalisation of certain minorities. An example of this is the reaffirmation of gender stereotypes through expressions and comments that attribute certain roles to each of the different genders according to their sexual characteristics. Another example is generically speaking in the masculine as if it were a neutral communication modality. The language used like this leads to ambiguous communication and the invisibilities of other social groups in society, such as women, trans, and non-binary individuals.

⁴ Type of language that encompasses both written and spoken communications.

⁵ Refers to the act of communication achieved through spoken word.

⁶ Refers to the act of communication achieved through the written word.

⁷ Iconicity or Iconic language refers to instances in which the form of language is resembled by symbols, signs, and visual representations.

⁸ Refers to the act of communication that presides the use of visual images over language.

⁹ Refers to the act of communication which uses physical behavior, expressions, and mannerisms to communicate non-verbally.

¹⁰ Also known as vocalics, which refers to the use of non-verbal elements in speech, such as intonation, and register, among others.

¹¹ Refers to a branch of non-verbal communication that comprises how people and animals communicate via the sense of touch.

¹² Refers to how space and proximity affect human interactions.

Numerous international instruments aim to broaden the deconstruction of sociocultural patterns, including language, thus, achieving a more equitable and inclusive society for all people. Some of these instances have been the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women¹³ and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará¹⁴).

The implementation of non-discriminatory language is not just a matter of political correctness; it is a real and powerful tool that aids in the inclusion of individual and collective attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions. According to the survey applied in 2019 on the gender situation within OLACEFS, 77% of the staff members consider that gender equality is incorporated in the daily language within their SAI. Despite this, one out of every two women surveyed perceives that the institution has not integrated gender equality in its formal discourse, which indicates an institutional gap with this issue¹⁵.

In this guide, The OLACEFS Working Group on Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination proposes the use of gender-inclusive language through a viewpoint of neutrality where lexical options should not prioritise one social group over another; or the use of one shouldn't be perceived as universal or preferred. At the same time this proposal suggests avoiding visual burden in written language caused by the repetition of pronouns. With the tools of language, we must express ourselves in a way that does not discriminate against anyone based on gender, gender identity, or gender expression, nor perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Using neutral language facilitates social change and contributes to gender equality, as well as reflecting and powerfully influencing people's attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions, thereby reducing gender stereotypes. Moreover, consciously using or not neutral language sends an implicit message in our communications, since avoiding neutral language denies the inherently diverse nature of humans and thus further discriminates against non-binary people.

¹³ Naciones Unidas, Convención sobre la eliminación de todas las formas de discriminación contra la mujer. Disponible en: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw_SP.pdf

¹⁴ OEA. (1994). Convención Interamericana para prevenir, sancionar y erradicar la violencia contra la mujer "Convención de Belém do Pará". Extraída de: <https://www.oas.org/juridico/spanish/tratados/a-61.html>

¹⁵ OLACEFS (2021) Política sobre Igualdad de Género y No Discriminación, pág. 47.

What is the role of language in SAIs?

Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), like all institutions that are part of the State, are at the service of citizens. On this basis, SAIs must create institutional efforts that intersect the Human rights approach and the gender perspective, as it is part of the commitments outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as various international treaties relating to human rights.

One of the leading principles of OLACEFS' Policy on Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination is precisely equality and Non-discrimination. This principle and values must prevail in all actions of the SAIs that comprise OLACEFS, as well as in the actions of all the people who work in them. We understand that gender plays a role in many aspects of our lives, and one of the ways is through language. The power of our society's hierarchies and its resulting inequalities relies on language by holding back useless conceptions and marginalizing minorities through discourse, but language also embraces the possibility of educating and perpetuating values such as those mentioned above. In this regard, the State needs to take a stand and make these values and principles relevant in our language, where neutrality is the key to not leaving anyone behind.

The GTG maintains that SAIs must fulfil their duty and responsibility by becoming aware of language's power; being firm and taking responsibility are the first steps towards achieving a neutral language that reaffirms equality and non-discrimination.

In what ways can we use gender-neutral language in our institutions?

The Policy on Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination has as its fifth central objective: "to sensitize SAI staff on the importance of the use of neutral and inclusive language". Herewith, it is expected that the civil servants of the member SAIs of OLACEFS will question and raise awareness on the language that has prevailed in usage thus far and incorporate a more neutral language in their daily work.

The following three tools are made available to the OLACEFS community to help staff members adapt their communication towards a free-bias language.

Advice:

Before communicating orally or in writing question yourself:

Do you know the person who is addressed? Do you know their gender identity?

If you already know the gender identities of the people, you can assess the manner of your message. You can decide whether you will use gendered pronouns or will omit any, and tailor it according to your necessities. When writing about a known individual, it is recommended to use that person's identified pronouns.

If you are not sure about the gender identity of the person who is going to receive your message keep using the person's name, surname, or title rather than substituting for a pronoun. Rephrase as necessary to reduce the number of times you must repeat it.

Refer to the pronouns that transgender and gender-nonconforming people use as "identified pronouns," "self-identified pronouns," or "pronouns".

I. Self-Diagnosis

The GTG developed an acronym that is guided by a pair of questions as a tool to facilitate the use of neutral language as a self-diagnosis:

The language we use is EQUAL?

Engage

- Am I engaging in a manner that includes everyone?

Question

- Am I open to learning, owning, questioning, and raising awareness among my colleagues about the use of language?

Use

- As a civil servant, do I use language in an inclusive and non-discriminatory manner?

Assure

- Does my message guarantee and respect the principle of equality and non-discrimination?

Lead

- Do I take the lead on applying neutral language?
- Do I manage to communicate my messages in a neutral language?

II. Guidelines on gender-neutral language

Multiple alternatives allow to apply neutral language and avoid gender-marked nouns, gender references, or gender-bias expressions. The GTG informs and suggests the following strategies:

❖ *Use non-discriminatory language.*

Avoid Gendered Nouns: We recommend avoiding the use of gender-specific language. Individuals regularly utilise gendered language when referring to others, even if the gender does not align with the subject. Although many of us may use these terms without the intention to exclude others, gendered language does not acknowledge or validate the existence of those who identify outside of society's gender binarism. Using gender-inclusive or neutral language, we as a collective can impact positively and reconsider previous gendered stereotypes rooted in our day-to-day language.

Some examples of gendered nouns and their more inclusive alternatives:

Gendered noun	Gender-neutral noun
Man	Person, individual
Mankind	People, human beings, humanity
Man-made	Machine-made, synthetic, artificial
The common man	The average person
Manpower	Workforce, workers
Mother country	Homeland
Manned	crewed
Male, female	People of different genders
Fraternal	Social

Advice: Although most English nouns do not possess any type of grammatical gender, some nouns referring to people or humankind do not have a separate form from the particle "men". Nowadays, people usually prefer more neutral forms, such as everyone or everybody, distinguished guests, colleagues, collaborators, partners, associates, all assembled, team, folks, friends, humans, individuals, person, people or even y'all.

Avoid the use of adjectives weighted with gender stereotypes: We need to pay attention to the use of different adjectives that may be associated with gender stereotypes. The prevalence of these tendencies has decreased, and progress has been made, however, some adjectives can connote bias and prejudice when used in a particular context, especially when referring to gender. These age-old valorisations and preconceptions that revolve around gender stereotypes must be addressed and removed from our vocabularies.

For example:

Quality	Male term	Female term
Emotional	Passionate	Hysterical
Forthright	Assertive	Aggressive
Leader	Commanding	Bossy
Determined	Go-getter	Strongheaded
Career-focused	Ambitious	Ambitious (negative), Dragon Lady
Intimidating	Dominant	Ball-busting. Abusive
Successful	Genius	Hard Worker
Parent with a job	Employee, Worker	Working mother
Arguing intensely	Vehement	Illogical, Irrational, unreasonable, unapproachable, irritating
Arguing Calmly	Rational	Cold, Calculating

Words used only for women	
Bubbly	Excessively cheerful
High maintenance	Vain, Expensive habits
Pushy	Demanding, Overbearing
Sassy	Self-assured, confident

Pronouns: The use of pronoun requires specificity and care since it's one of the few gender markers available in English. When writing about a known individual, it is recommended to use that **person's identified pronouns**. Some individuals may alternate between "he" and "she" or "they," whereas others use no pronouns at all and use their names in place of pronouns.

Pronouns	Subject	Object	Possessive	Reflexive
He/him / his	He spoke	I answered him	This is his group	He looks at himself
She / Her / Hers	She spoke	I answered her	This is her group	She looks at herself
They / Them / Theirs	They spoke	I answered them	This is their group	They look at themselves

Not recommended Solutions

The use of alternative pronouns such as “ze,” “xe,” “hir,” “per,” “ve,” “ey,” and “hen” (Middle Swedish gender-neutral pronoun), are not recommended for workplace use since they are ambiguous and confusing. We recommend using “**They**” as a singular pronoun when gender-inclusive language is required or relevant.

Other preferable options are:

- **Rephrasing to omit the pronoun.**
- **Replace with a definite article (the) or an indefinite article (a).**
- **Replace with a descriptive phrase.**

❖ *Do not make gender visible when is not relevant to the conversation.*

Omit the gendered word: We recommend omitting the gendered word in those contexts where it is not indispensable for the reader and where it can help to contribute to achieving a more gender-neutral language. We encourage that this can be done effectively also by replacing it with a name or title or even by rephrasing the statement.

For example:

Less Inclusive	Inclusive solution
Requests for the seminar on “Government Auditing Standards on the public sector” are being sent to <u>her/his</u> email.	Requests for the seminar on “Government Auditing Standards on the public sector” are being sent to the <u>coordinator’s</u> official email.

The Finance Director was asked a question regarding the new 2023 scholarship program for civil servants. <u>She</u> replied it was not included in the agenda to be discussed.	The Finance Director was asked a question regarding the new 2023 scholarship program for civil servants. <u>The</u> program was not included in the agenda to be discussed.
Ms. Flowers was questioned about an unissued passport, and <u>she</u> said: "The passport before this one would have been spoiled, that is why is unissued". Then <u>she</u> was asked whether there was a chance of applying again and <u>she</u> responded "yes".	<u>A question was asked</u> about an unissued passport and Ms. Flowers answered: "It would have been spoiled before this passport was issued." Flowers <u>replied "yes"</u> when asked whether the citizen would be able to apply again.

❖ *Forms of address*

Titles and Names: When addressing or referring to specific individuals, there should be consistency in the way women and men are referred to: if one of them is addressed by their name, last name, courtesy title, or profession, the other one should be as well. We recommend that the most inclusive solution is addressing everyone with their respective title or position in the official documentation.

For example:

Less Inclusive	Inclusive Solution
<u>Counsellor Geller</u> (surname and title for a man) and <u>Janice</u> (First name and title for women) will be attending the panel tomorrow.	<u>Counsellor Geller</u> and <u>Chair Green</u> will be attending the panel tomorrow.
<u>The Financial Secretary Jones</u> and <u>Mrs. Rachel</u> are in charge of electing the new Working Group on gender and non-discrimination.	<u>The financial Secretary</u> and <u>the Deputy Director</u> are in charge of electing the new Working Group on Gender and Non-discrimination.

If you're currently in contact with someone, you can ask how that person would like to be referred to.

Tailor your message when necessary!

You have likely been told not to use the passive form while writing...

But we do recommend using the passive voice as a recourse for outside workplace interactions. When changing a sentence into passive voice the reader's focus shifts from the subject to the object. **Which can be helpful to eradicate gender stereotypes and gendered nouns that are rooted in daily communication.**

We and other international institutions recommend using this strategy only when:

- You need or want to avoid using **gendered pronouns**.
- To emphasise more on the **action or object** rather than the subject.
- You don't want to make clear the subject or want to avoid **misgendering**.

III. Glossary for gender-neutral language

The following is a series of practical examples for people who wish to apply neutral languages to their day-to-day life.

Greetings and Addressees

Not recommended	Recommended
Greetings Ladies and gentlemen...	Greetings everybody.
Hello guys	Hello everyone.
Sir (in "Dear sir", etc.)	Dear Editor, Dear members, Dear committee, to whom it may concern or Dear [Professional title].
Gentleman and ladies	Colleagues, Gentle people.
Ma'am, Sir	Excuse me.
Men	All assembled.

Titles/positions

Not recommended	Recommended
Chairman/chairwoman	Chairperson, chair
Lady Prime Minister	Prime Minister
Congressman	Member of Congress, Legislator, congressional representative, congressperson

Councilman	Council member
Ombudsman	Ombuds, Official Investigator, mediator
Assemblyman	Assemblyperson

Professions

Not recommended	Recommended
Male/female lawyer	Lawyer
Male/female consultant	Consultant, advisor
Spokesman	Spokesperson
Layman	Layperson
Foreman	Foreperson, supervisor, boss
Salesman/saleswoman	Salesperson
Cleaning lady	Office cleaner
Crewman	Staff
Middleman	intermediary

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