

# Respectful Language: Pregnancy & People

Respectful or inclusive language conveys respect to all people, promotes belonging, and seeks to disrupt the social norms that perpetuate injustice. Respectful language avoids bias, steers clear of words and sayings that cause offense or harm, and affirms multiple aspects of human identity.

Everyone deserves to be treated and described with respect – and there is no exception during the period surrounding pregnancy. When communicating about pregnancy-related topics, it's especially important to carefully consider language around gender, sex, and sexuality.

This resource offers guiding principles and suggested wording for respectful language to describe the people who experience pregnancy. It is designed for public health communicators who are sharing information and ideas on topics such as respectful perinatal care, morbidity or mortality.

## Key principles of respectful language

### **Key Principle 1: Expect, embrace, and encourage language change.**

Because language is constantly evolving, respectful language practices are also dynamic. Words that convey respect to people change with time. This is especially true for words that refer to groups with less power or privilege, as social forces tend to quickly assign these words negative connotations, and affected groups seek to resist those labels. Respectful language practitioners recognize this dynamic, tune into conversations about the limits or problems with words, and move in solidarity with community leaders pushing for linguistic change.

Some ways of implementing this principle include adopting and adhering to a style guide that reflects current best practices, following conversations about changing community usage, discussing evolving connotations regularly within your organization. When it comes to maternal health issues, this means that communicators need to pay close attention to terminology around non-conforming expressions of gender identity and around the racial and ethnic groups that experience disparities in negative birth outcomes. As a practical matter, consider reviewing and updating your style guide every other year at a minimum.

**Key Principle 2: Use language that affirms the many ways that people can express their sex, gender, and sexuality.**

Respectful language works from the premise that sex, gender, and sexuality are distinct and meaningful aspects of a person's identity. Because a safe and respectful pregnancy experience is free from harm and mistreatment, and maintains dignity<sup>1</sup>, it is important to choose and use language that respects people's expressed gender identities.

At a practical level, respectful language acknowledges that the universe of people who can experience pregnancy and give birth includes people with a diverse range of gender identities, including cis-gender women, transgender men, non-binary and gender fluid people, and agender people, who do not identify with having any gender.

Respectful language rejects and disrupts bias against the gender identities that have been marginalized and minoritized: namely, women and girls; and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender fluid, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, agender, aromantic, or who otherwise do not conform with traditional sex roles and gender norms (LGBTQIA+).

**Key Principle 3: Anticipate and navigate skepticism and opposition.**

Because respectful language often departs from long-standing social norms, it readily draws attention. New terminology may spark spontaneous confusion as well as carefully considered efforts to critique or suppress it. Practitioners of respectful language must, therefore, be prepared to respond strategically to negative reactions, from genuine misunderstandings to disingenuous mischaracterizations.

One way to implement this principle includes preparing thoughtful responses to skeptical or hostile questions about newly-introduced terms. In general, the most effective responses explain the purpose and values related to the change. It may be helpful, for instance, to explicitly state that the goal is to convey respect to all people, or to promote a sense of greater belonging for people who have been historically excluded.

It is rarely effective to directly rebut or "fact-check" vocal opponents coming from a place of hostility. Instead of engaging in an adversarial exchange – which can alienate the wider audience – seek to demonstrate and convey that you are a reasonable partner in an important, inclusive conversation about doing what's right and fair.

# Suggested practices and sample language

	Do	Don't	Example
1	Build the understanding that people other than women can experience pregnancy and childbirth.	Don't violate the existing, widely shared mental model that pregnancy and birthing involves cis-gender women.	<i>"Our program supports better health outcomes for women, transgender men, and non-binary people who are pregnant."</i>
2	Use an additive approach. Begin with women and continue by naming other types of people who can experience pregnancy and birthing.	Don't leave "women" out of the conversation by using "birthing people" or "pregnant people" as a standalone substitute.	
3	Use phrasing that conveys that pregnancy is a distinct moment in the life course, rather than a distinct category of people. For example, talk about "the experience of pregnancy and birthing."	Avoid standalone labels based on reproductive organs. Phrases like <i>people with uteruses</i> or <i>uterus owners</i> medicalizes pregnancy and reinforces a binary view of sex.	<i>"The experience of giving birth is just one stop on the journey of child-bearing. Everyone who can or will experience pregnancy needs respectful, safe, and readily accessible perinatal care before they conceive, while they are pregnant, while giving birth, and well after their pregnancies end."</i>
4	When showing photographs of pregnancy, show a diverse range of body types, skin tones, and gender expressions.	Don't rely only on stock images of heterosexual couples or cis-gender women.	
5	Look for ways to connect the issue of racial and ethnic inequities to inequities related to sex, sexuality, and gender expression.	Don't leave the impression that "populations" are one-dimensional or that systemic racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity are disconnected.	<i>"To create a safe, effective, and respectful natal care system, we must listen closely to the voices of people who are most at risk of injury or death due to preventable pregnancy complications. Right now, risks are higher for Black and American Indian/Native Alaskan women, transgender men, and nonbinary people who are pregnant or birthing."</i>

# Acknowledgement

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The contents are the responsibility of the FrameWorks Institute and do not necessarily reflect the official views of, nor an endorsement by, the US Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control, or U.S. Government.

If you incorporate ideas from this resource your communications, we'd love to hear about it! [Send us a link and tell us about your experience.](#)

# Endnotes

1. World Health Organization. The prevention and elimination of disrespect and abuse during facility-based childbirth: WHO statement. 2014. Accessed at: [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/134588/WHO\\_RHR\\_14.23\\_eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/134588/WHO_RHR_14.23_eng.pdf).



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