

# Gender-equal communication

## Norm criticism and communication

### The ABCs of norm-critical communication

A norm is an unwritten rule specifying what is considered normal or acceptable behaviour within a certain group. It may be implicit, 'obvious' and taken for granted. It is often linked to power, and is including for some people and excluding for others. Violation of a norm often leads to certain consequences, ranging from mere exclusion to serious violence.

A society needs some norms to prevent the development of anarchy. Yet other norms may be restrictive and lead to unequal granting of privileges. Examples of these norms include the gender power structure, ethnic norms, the norm concerning religion, the hetero norm, the binary gender norm, the age norm and the norm concerning functional ability, all of which can be directly linked to the grounds for discrimination specified in the Swedish Discrimination Act.

Norm criticism is about bringing attention to norms and the individuals who represent them. Pointing to conditions that are 'obvious' and taken for granted makes it easier to question the norms and make them more including. Norm criticism is the opposite of what is often called the tolerance perspective, according to which those who fit the norm are supposed to tolerate those who are considered to deviate. There is an element of power built into the tolerance perspective, as some individuals have the power to tolerate others. For example, the Swedish majority has the power to tolerate the immigrants. Those who are heterosexual are supposed to tolerate those who are homosexual.

The notion of the standard citizen makes a great number of people in society appear invisible. For example, if a newspaper writes an article about Valentine's Day, it often comes with a picture of a fair-skinned heterosexual couple with no visible disabilities. This is what the popular image of love looks like unless your norm awareness is up to par.

Increased inclusion of people requires norm awareness and an ability to not habitually fall into norm-driven behaviour. It is also important to avoid stereotypical situations and environments. For example, individuals with a disability are often perceived as victims in need of help in various ways. They are rarely shown in pictures that are not directly related to disabilities.

Also, norms are often interrelated. All of us are human beings who can be described for example in terms of sex, ethnic belonging, sexual orientation, nationality and age. People's identities are formed by a complex combination of a large number of components, and a person usually fits into the norm in some respects but not others.

### **Things to remember – Ethnic belonging**

- When is it important to describe ethnic belonging?
- Let people assign their own ethnic belonging; don't assign it for them
  - Avoid stereotypes
- Name the norm – not just those who deviate from it

### **Gender**

- How do we describe women and men?
- Who is a victim, perpetrator, subject, object, active and passive?
- Who is mentioned only by first name and who is mentioned by both first name and family name?

### **Disability**

- A person is not defined by his or her disability. Don't say 'a disabled person'; instead say 'a person with a disability'.
- Let people assign their own group belonging; don't assign it for them.
- Who is active – passive? What does for example the word 'wheelchair-bound' signal? Rather talk about 'a person who uses a wheelchair'.

### **Summary norm criticism**

Communication creates a view of the world around us. Thus, norm-critical communication should:

- Reach the target without re-creating stereotypes
- Make the norm visible and question it
- Turn the normativity upside down
- Include more groups
- Be characterised by conceptual awareness

### **Checklist**

- Is there a 'we' in the text? Who does it refer to? What characterises 'we'?
- Is there a 'them' in the text? Who does it refer to? What characterises 'them'?
- What is described as a problem? Who is responsible for the solution?
- Who is active, who is passive?
- Who is visible, who is invisible?
- What is the picture supposed to demonstrate? What do I want to say with the picture?

# Gender-aware visual communication

What do your pictures say about women and men?

The concept of gender refers to socially, culturally and historically constructed features typically associated with a person's sex. Thus, gender has to do with what society deems 'masculine' and 'feminine'. There are plenty of norms defining masculine and feminine behaviour. Masculinity and femininity is continuously created through body language, clothes, choice of public toilet, occupations, interests etc. And it is created through imagery. Pictures show what is possible – you can't be what you can't see.

A typical feature of normative imagery is that women are depicted from above and men from below. People depicted from below look down at you, which gives them more symbolic power. And you are assigned more symbolic power over somebody who looks up at you. It also makes that person look smaller. Women are more likely than men to sit down in a picture. They smile and look into the camera, meeting the eyes of the spectator. Men typically don't look into the camera and thereby avoid confirming the spectator. Men are often portrayed in their occupational context – they are often working and are supposed to look busy.

Also women with power are often depicted normatively. Knowing this explains why former leader of the Swedish Social Democrats Mona Sahlin smiles, looks into the camera and is shown in a high angle while her male counterpart Göran Persson is shown talking continuously in a lower angle. Despite the fact that they have the exact same function as leader of the same political party, the portrayal of them is completely different.

The normative rule for imagery is that women are passive and men active. What is it that makes us – the spectators – so comfortable with this? The theory of the male gaze might be one explanation. According to this theory, the woman is always the object, both in magazines targeting women and in magazines targeting men. Thus, women and men view pictures in the same way, with the same gaze, and consequently women must always pose using a body language meant to invite attention. In contrast, cases where a man invites attention in this way are highly unusual.

## The most common clichés

- Women are portrayed with a noticeable air of insecurity through language, body language and gestures
- Men appear decisive, controlled, dominant, self-confident and willing to take risks
- Working women are removed from their occupational context and are shown smiling and posing
- Men look busy doing something
- Men/boys are active and work/play
- Women/girls are passive and pose in front of the camera
- Boys take up a lot of space, girls move out of the way
- Girls are cute, boys are strong
- Angry men
- Women in advertisements – a white, slim, young and retouched woman wearing a minimal outfit selling something

## A gender approach to imagery

- Representation – count heads. 70–80 per cent of all people depicted in the media are men
- Let the diversity be guided by the seven grounds for discrimination
- Assess your material, for example a website. How many of the individuals shown are Swedish men around age 30? Change and replace for greater diversity
- More visible representatives reduces the risk of a group being viewed stereotypically. An example: A furniture company needed a picture of a family for its catalogue and chose a lesbian couple

## Gender-equal language

How can we use language in the gender equality work?

The relationship between language and reality is key in any discussion on the use of language to facilitate change. This relationship can be viewed in two ways:

- The language reflects reality – there are women and men, so we talk about women and men
- The language creates reality – talking about women and men makes us see humanity as consisting of women and men

Sometimes the language reflects reality, for example when somebody describes an experience. But language is also a way to create reality. This is done through linguistic nuances, expressions, words that can mean different things to different people etc. For example, the term 'gender equality' has helped create a reality where it is seen as desirable to work for equal conditions for everybody regardless of gender. Two-hundred years ago, nobody would have understood the meaning of the term.

Sometimes our language lags the development of society. For example, English words such as 'chairman', 'spokesman' and 'fireman' stem from an era where these positions in society were reserved exclusively for men, and continued to be used long after they had technically become obsolete. Similar examples can be found in Swedish. In the 1970s in Sweden, many groups started questioning whether the language used should reflect old-fashioned values. For example, the Group 8 feminist movement wanted to introduce a female spelling alphabet (the traditional Swedish spelling alphabet consists of only male names – Adam, Bertil, Cesar etc.). If we are ever going to have a gender-equal society, we need to modernise our language, they said.

'Official statistics based on individuals shall be disaggregated by sex unless there are special reasons for not doing so.'

Section 14 of the Swedish Official Statistics Ordinance (2001:100)

The Swedish language is becoming increasingly gender neutral. Especially the language used in official contexts has evolved in this direction.

A few years ago, the Swedish government asked researcher Karin Milles to write a handbook on gender-equal language use in cooperation with the Swedish Language Council. In Swedish, certain nouns describing individuals in terms of

what they are or do are particularly problematic in the context of gender equality, as they are implicitly assigned a gender. Some of these nouns reveal the gender of the individuals who they traditionally have applied to. 'Foreman' and 'midwife' are examples of English equivalents of this group of nouns. In some cases it is easy to modify them to make them gender neutral; in other cases it is more difficult.

## **Pronouns**

Swedish has many expressions that make women invisible. English equivalents include 'a man or a mouse', 'the man on the street' and 'a manned aircraft'. There is also an old convention of saying and writing 'han' [he] when we don't know somebody's gender or are referring to a human being in general.

### **General strategy for gender-equal language use:**

- Target all genders, women, men and others – make the language accessible to everybody
- Populate your language with both women and men, use examples, avoid stereotypes
- Use gender-neutral words when possible. English examples of this practice include 'spokesperson' instead of 'spokesman', 'ombud' or 'ombudsperson' instead of 'ombudsman' and 'chair' or 'chairperson' instead of 'chairman'
- If needed, specify sex by using the adjectives male and female instead of using gendered nouns. Using the English examples above, say 'male/female spokesperson' instead of spokesman/spokeswoman
- Feel free to introduce more gender-neutral terms in your language. Language authorities are not always one step ahead of the rest of us, sometimes change needs to come from the grass root level – we have the right to decide what we want to be called

### **How to avoid the generic 'he'**

Example: If a student wants to appeal a grade, he must contact the course coordinator.

#### **Alternatives:**

- 'He or she'/'she or he'
- In Swedish, the gender-neutral pronoun 'hen' can be used
- Pluralise: If students want to appeal a grade, they must contact the course coordinator
- Repeat: If a student wants to appeal a grade, the student must contact the course coordinator
- Restructure the sentence: A student who wants to appeal a grade must contact the course coordinator
- Sometimes 'you' can be used

### **The Swedish gender-neutral pronoun 'hen'**

It is unclear where the word 'hen' comes from. It is most likely a mix of 'she' and 'he'. Maybe it stems from the Finnish gender-neutral pronoun 'hän'.

'Hen' was first discussed in an article by Karl-Hampus Dahlstedt published in 1966–1967. There are indications that Dahlstedt was pondering over the issue already in the 1950s.

The year 2012 has been called the 'hen' year in Sweden. Queer and transgender persons began using the word for individuals who didn't fully fit either of the conventional genders. The word gave rise to a big and heated debate.

The use of 'hen' continues to draw both support and criticism. Its supporters include feminists, gender educators, trans activists, authors, students, some politicians and journalists. The word has started to appear in for example parliamentary documents, student essays, newspapers and magazines. Yet it remains uncommon for example in the external communication of government agencies.

## Exercises

### Exercise 1

Use a gender-neutral generic pronoun ('hen' in Swedish) in all material published on your website.

- What do you think about it?
- List the most important advantages and disadvantages

### Exercise 2

Identify five gendered nouns (In English: spokesman, midwife, barber, seamstress etc.) and come up with gender-neutral alternatives.

About this material

This material was developed 17 March 2014 at the training titled 'Jämställd kommunikation i statliga myndigheter' [gender-equal communication in government agencies] within the framework of the Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies project. Lillemor Dahlgren and Anneli Tillberg from the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research led the training. Karin Milles, linguist and associate professor at Södertörn University, and photographer and blogger Thomas Gunnarsson, also called the gender photographer, who blogs about how gender is portrayed in media and advertisements, contributed as lecturers. The material has been compiled by Cecilia Køljing, Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research.