The Use of Inclusive Language in Parliamentary Work

ParlAmericas' briefing documents present comparative research, policy considerations, and legislative action items on issues that matter to parliamentarians, with a focus on our member parliaments in the Americas and Caribbean region.

What is inclusive language?

Inclusive language refers to ways of speaking and writing that acknowledge and make visible the diversity of people, especially those who have historically been on the margins of public narratives and discourse and have been limited in experiencing the full exercise of their human rights.

The use of inclusive language contributes to building more pluralistic and equitable societies by challenging stereotypes and prejudices. It serves to explicitly highlight that the world is made up of individuals of diverse bodies, identities, and perspectives, all of whom deserve to be recognized and respected.

Using language that reflects this diversity not only helps prevent discrimination but also reinforces the protection of human rights. Moreover, its use aligns with international commitments made by states in the areas of equality and non-discrimination.

There can be different perspectives on the best terminology to use in relation to inclusive language and good practices can also shift over time, reflecting the fluidity of language and its evolution to match learning from underrepresented communities. The objective of this tool is therefore not to impose a single model, but to expand expressive possibilities that ensure all people are seen and included.

Why is it important to pay attention to language?

Language does not merely describe reality; it also shapes it, offers new ways of understanding, and influences social attitudes and cultural norms. The way we refer to people can affect how they are perceived.

Language is a living and constantly-evolving tool. Expressions once widely accepted may now be seen as offensive, inappropriate, or discriminatory. Recognizing the dynamic nature of language is key to adapting communication practices.

Using inclusive language with an intersectional[1] approach in the parliamentary context helps uphold the principle of representativeness, acknowledging that all population groups are impacted by the outcomes of legislative work. Precision in language is also critical to effective legislation that can be correctly interpreted in accordance with its meaning and intention.

Inclusive language in parliaments

In parliamentary work, inclusive language can be a key tool for building institutions that are more representative, legitimate, and accessible. Respectfully acknowledging social diversity allows parliaments to reflect the plurality of voices and experiences of the population under conditions of equality.

Beyond being a communication tool, the use of inclusive language creates an opportunity to promote cultural change that encourages the active consideration of different population groups in legislative work. While this action alone may not transform power structures, its use can support and strengthen broader institutional and cultural change.

By affirming the rights of historically marginalized groups, such as women, children, adolescents, older persons, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, and LGBTQI+ individuals, parliaments promote a discourse that is fairer, more representative, respectful, and aligned with democratic principles.

Moreover, the use of inclusive language can help build public trust by positioning parliament as a safe and respectful space that fosters broader and more diverse participation. In contrast, using exclusionary or inaccurate language can lead to offense, mistrust, or exclusion, and hinder meaningful engagement.

A common strategy adopted in Latin American parliaments to promote the use of inclusive language is to develop manuals or guidelines for reference in parliamentary work. These resources help establish general principles for promoting non-discriminatory communication that reflects institutional openness and representativeness. These exist in the parliaments of Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico, for example.

These guides typically offer concrete recommendations on what to do and what to avoid in both written and spoken communication. They also explain why certain language may be offensive or discriminatory. These most commonly focus on good practices for gender-inclusive and disability-inclusive language.

A helpful reference in English is the article, Legistics: Gender-inclusive Language, published by the Canadian Department of Justice, which shares recommended techniques for gender-inclusive legislative drafting and provides some historical background on gender in English legislative language.

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1 For more information on **intersectionality**, please visit the following link.

Inclusive language with an intersectional lens

Inclusive language requires the use of an intersectional approach that promotes gender mainstreaming and recognizes and respects multiple dimensions of human diversity, such as disability, age, and ethnic and racial origins, among other identity factors. This contributes to more just, accurate, and representative discourse.

Guiding suggestions for using inclusive language in parliamentary work are presented below. These focus on some of the population groups that tend to be underrepresented, but they do not reflect the full spectrum of existing diversities. Applying these strategies alone does not ensure fully inclusive communication; rather, they provide a starting point and general principles that can be applied when thinking about other diverse identities, including in relation to migration status, educational background, socioeconomic position, and others.

Gender

In parliamentary documentation, it is important to avoid the exclusive use of the masculine form when referring to roles such as "chairman," "spokesman," or "congressman," or when otherwise referring generally to parliamentarians and other parliamentary stakeholders. This language is often a holdover from times before women were able to participate in public life and its continued use can be interpreted as a symbolic message that men's presence remains the norm. Various studies have shown that **moving away from this practice contributes to addressing women's underrepresentation** and that of individuals of other identities.[2]

Using language that incorporates a gender perspective – both in parliament's internal settings and in legislation – sends a clear message of inclusion, equity, and respect for all people. This approach acknowledges that society is made up of individuals with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, many of whom, including women and members of the LGBTQI+ community, are often not reflected in more general or imprecise language.

Further, in legal and institutional contexts, the use of gender-inclusive language also tends to be more accurate, functional, and appropriate, as it avoids exclusionary or ambiguous references.

This approach is consistent with international human rights frameworks, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women (Belém do Pará Convention).

The following are suggested strategies for applying gender-inclusive language in parliamentary work:

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2 Cheryan, Sapna and Hazel Rose Markus. "Masculine defaults: Identifying and mitigating hidden cultural biases." Psychology Review Vol. 127, No. 6, 2020, p. 1022-1052.

Strategy 1: Use generic descriptors, titles and other words that are gender-inclusive

Avoid titles that contain "man" or imply gender.

❌ Chairman → ✅ Chair or Chairperson

❌ Spokesman → ✅ Spokesperson

❌ Congressman / Assemblyman → ✅ Parliamentarian / Member of [Congress, the House of Assembly, House of Representative, etc.] / Legislator

Strategy 2: Avoid gendered pronouns

Avoid the pronouns "he" and "she" (including the doublet "he or she") and their other grammatical forms by:

1. Repeating the noun;

   ❌ Each legislator must submit **his** report by Friday. → ✅ Each legislator must submit the **legislator's** report by Friday.

2. Replacing possessive pronouns with a definite or indefinite article;

   ❌ A parliamentarian must represent **his** constituents fairly. → ✅ Parliamentarians must represent **their** constituents fairly.

3. Using the plural, if the context allows;

   ❌ Each committee member must submit **his** draft resolution by Monday. → ✅ Each committee member must submit **the** draft resolution by Monday.

4. Structuring the sentence so that the pronoun is not required;

   ❌ When a senator votes, she must explain **her** reasoning. → ✅ Senators must explain **their** reasoning when voting.

5. Using the pronoun "who";

   ❌ If a senator wants to speak, **he** must raise **his** hand. → ✅ A senator **who** wants to speak must raise their hand.

6. Using the singular, gender-neutral pronoun "they" and its other forms.

   ❌ If a member is absent, **she** should notify the clerk in advance. → ✅ If a member is absent, **they** should notify the clerk in advance.

Persons with disabilities

Using inappropriate language can be offensive, discriminatory, and exclusionary, hindering the full and genuine participation of persons with disabilities in parliaments. In contrast, inclusive language is a key tool to combat ableism: an erroneous, biased, and discriminatory perspective based on the belief that people without disabilities are more capable, more valuable, or superior.

Avoiding expressions that can be received as hurtful or patronizing and choosing respectful, person-centred language helps build parliaments that are more accessible, empathetic, and representative.

This approach aligns with international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, which recognize the right to equality and non-discrimination and promote respect for the dignity, autonomy, and full participation of persons with disabilities in society.

To apply inclusive language when referring to persons with disabilities, the United Nations recommends following the following general principles:

Principle 1: Use people-first language[3]

Emphasize the individual by mentioning the person before the disability. Do not solely pluralize the name of a disability to refer to a group of people.

❌			✅
Dyslexics	▶		People with dyslexia
The blind	▶		Blind persons / Persons who are blind

Principle 2: Avoid labels and stereotypes

Recognize persons with disabilities as part of human diversity. Avoid infantilization and phrases that imply exceptionalism or dependence.

❌		✅
Inherently vulnerable people		
Inspirational		
Brave or courageous	▶	Use objective, context-appropriate descriptions without underestimating or exaggerating.
Like children		
Dependent		

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3 Although people-first language is the most widely accepted way to refer to persons with disabilities, it is not the only recommended or accepted approach. There is also a perspective that prefers the use of Identity-First Language, which should be adopted if communicated as someone's preference.

Principle 3: Do not use condescending euphemisms

Terms that attempt to "soften" disabilities, even if well intentioned, can be imprecise, confusing, or perceived as condescending, especially in normative or political contexts.

❌ Differently abled / People of all abilities ➤ ✅ Persons with disabilities

❌ DisAbility ➤ ✅ Disability

❌ Special needs / Special assistance ➤ ✅ Tailored assistance

Principle 4: Disability is not an illness or a problem

Avoid referring to disability through a medicalized, charitable, or personal tragedy lens.

❌ To suffer from or be afflicted by a disability ➤ ✅ Has a disability

❌ Victim of cerebral palsy ➤ ✅ Person with cerebral palsy

Additional resources:

- [Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines](#) by UN Geneva

- [Disability Inclusive Communications Guidelines For Parliaments](#) by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Indigenous Peoples

The use of language that recognizes Indigenous Peoples in relevant legislation, as well as the use of respectful and appropriate terms when referring to their communities, is a key element in the visibility of these communities and guaranteeing their collective rights. These practices, in line with the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), reflect respect for their right to freely determine and express their own identity.

Strategy 1: Person-centred approach

Use language that respects individuals' identity and culture, avoiding generalizations, stereotypes, or terms with colonial or derogatory connotations.

❌ The Indigenous (which makes Indigenous persons seem like a homogeneous group) ➤ ✅ Indigenous communities / Indigenous Peoples

❌ The Afro-descendants ➤ ✅ Afro-descendant person

Whenever possible, use the specific name of the people, according to their self-identification.

Strategy 2: Avoid terms of appropriation or possession

Avoid expressions that portray Indigenous Peoples as part of the State or as subordinate groups.

❌ <u>Our</u> Indigenous Peoples ➤ ✅ <u>The</u> Indigenous Peoples

❌ The Indigenous Peoples <u>of</u> Ecuador ➤ ✅ Indigenous Peoples <u>in</u> Ecuador

Additional resources:

- [Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines](#), University of British Columbia

Ultimately, using specific language appropriate to a particular topic – rather than language that may be colloquial, overly general, or reflect stereotypes – helps to remove the ambiguity of legislation. Such an approach not only supports human rights and inclusion, but also aids in effective and accurate interpretation and implementation of laws.

For example:

- Using "children," "young people," or other non-specific language in [sexual violence legislation](#) can make protections less clear.

  - Instead, laws should use a clearly defined age range or a term with a clear national legal definition, such as "minors" or "individuals under the age of consent."

- Language in legislation related to [parental leave](#) or other care supports that only references "mothers" could exclude some parents or caregivers – including same-sex couples, adoptive parents, among others – from accessing needed rights, services, and leaves.

  - While laws should include specific provisions for birthing parents who require unique protections in relation to their working lives, drafting laws as gender neutral or with specific references to the diversity of family structures and experiences of parenthood helps ensure that provisions extend adequately to all parents and caregivers.

Adopting inclusive language in parliamentary work

Below are actions that parliaments can implement to apply inclusive language in their legislative and oversight functions. Also included are recommendations that align with the pillars of open parliament, recognizing the role both legislative openness and inclusive language play in fostering parliament's representativeness and accessibility.

Open parliament is a management and innovation model that seeks to bring parliaments closer to citizens while strengthening parliamentary functions in support of transparency and access to public information, accountability, inclusive citizen participation, and ethics and probity.

For more information on open parliament, see the [Road Map towards Legislative Openness 2.0](#).

Legislation

☑ Use language in legislative texts that aligns with international human rights standards.

☑ Prioritize people-centred phrasing (e.g., "person with a disability"), unless guidance from consultations in your national context reflects a preference for identity-first language.

☑ Use gender-sensitive legal drafting techniques to avoid the unnecessary use of gendered pronouns or reliance on the exclusive use of masculine references.

☑ Integrate inclusive language considerations into legislative drafting guidelines or manuals.

☑ Promote engagement with a diverse range of expert organizations (women's groups, organizations of persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, youth, etc.) in legislative work and public hearings to co-develop inclusive language proposals for specific laws.

☑ Use inclusive language in legislative communications, including social media posts, speeches, and press releases.

Oversight

☑ Frame questions and requests for information using inclusive language that avoids stereotypes or bias.

☑ Request data disaggregated by gender, age, disability, ethnicity, or other relevant characteristics.

☑ Assess whether public reports and policies use respectful, clear, and accessible language.[4]

☑ Apply a gender and diversity perspective in oversight hearings.

☑ Draft oversight reports using inclusive and non-discriminatory language.

☑ Monitor compliance with international human rights frameworks that promote equality and non-discrimination.

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4   We recommend consulting the "**Checklist for the Use of Inclusive Language**" found at the end of this document.

The Use of Inclusive Language in Parliamentary Work
Briefing document

Connecting inclusive language and the open parliament pillars

Citizen participation	➡ Use inclusive language strategies in public calls and dialogue spaces to avoid excluding population groups. ➡ Ensure that forms, publications, invitations, surveys, and other related materials are written using inclusive language. ➡ Promote inclusive language training for legislative staff involved in citizen participation processes.
Transparency and access to public information	➡ Publish data disaggregated by gender, age, ethnic background, and other relevant variables. ➡ Ensure the use of inclusive language in reports, graphics, press releases, and digital platforms. ➡ Review and update websites and social media to ensure the use of language that is inclusive, clear, and respectful to all.
Accountability	➡ Prepare accountability documents and materials using clear, accessible, and bias-free language. ➡ Include monitoring indicators on the use of inclusive language in management reports, accountability documents, and institutional self-assessments. Note: Consult the ParlAmericas tool on "*Plain Language in Parliamentary Work*."
Ethics and probity	➡ Include modules on inclusive language in institutional training sessions for parliamentary staff. ➡ Develop internal style guides that promote respectful, accurate, and non-discriminatory language. ➡ Establish protocols as part of ethics codes to address the use of discriminatory or exclusionary language by parliamentary staff or parliamentarians. ➡ Foster a respectful organizational culture by integrating inclusive language in internal communications (memos, emails, meetings).

Inclusive Language Checklist

	Questionnaire	YES	NO
1	Are gender stereotypes avoided, such as assigning caregiving roles to women and provider/protector roles to men?		
2	Has the content avoided implying the superiority of a specific gender?		
3	If images or visual aids are used, do they include women and marginalized population groups?		
4	If women are included in images or visual aids, are they shown in a variety of roles beyond those traditionally associated with women?		
5	Is gender-sensitive language used, avoiding the use of masculine framing as a standard?		
6	When referring to persons with disabilities, is people-first language (e.g., 'person with a disability') or another widely accepted form (e.g., 'disabled person') used, depending on context and preference?		
7	Are labels and stereotypes avoided when referring to disability?		
8	Is condescending or euphemistic language avoided when discussing disability?		
9	Is disability portrayed in a way that does not refer to it as an illness, tragedy, or source of suffering?		
10	When referring to Indigenous Peoples, is their self-determination respected?		
11	Is language that is derogatory or can be perceived as pejorative avoided when referring to Indigenous persons?		
12	Are possessive expressions such as "our Indigenous Peoples" avoided?		
13	If images or visual aids are used, do they include Indigenous or Afro-descendant persons?		
14	Is language related to any specific groups written in a way that will facilitate the full group's access to protections (e.g. parents / carers)?		
15	Are references to age groups or other specific demographic groups making use of a term that has clear legal definition that can be drawn upon to support interpretation?		

Other Helpful Resources

🔗 [Road Map towards Legislative Openness 2.0](#), ParlAmericas, 2022

🔗 [Legistics: Gender-inclusive Language](#), Canada's System of Justice, 2024

🔗 [Disability Inclusive Communications Guidelines For Parliaments](#), CPA, 2024

🔗 [Age-inclusive Language: Are You Using it in Your Writing and Everyday Speech?](#) Institute for Public Health, 2022

🔗 [Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines](#), UN Geneva, 2021

🔗 [Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines](#), University of British Columbia, 2024

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