Terminology guidelines to support WaterAid's equity and inclusion framework

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Introduction

Language both reflects and shapes our understanding of reality and can also influence the thoughts and actions of those around us. WaterAid's focus on equity and inclusion means we need to carefully consider the language we use to talk about discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion, and how we talk to people who are disadvantaged or marginalised in any way.

Language influences our actions. If we refer to people who are disadvantaged as if there is a problem with that person, we are more likely to focus on the person as a problem. It is more constructive to use language that shows that the problems related to a person's disadvantage stem from the attitudes, systems or practices that create barriers. This is more likely to encourage approaches that aim to remove those barriers.

Language has a big impact on children. Language shapes the way children think of themselves or others. Negative language can adversely affect a child's emotional development, and can become a barrier to building a healthy sense of self-esteem and determination to excel.

We 'inherit' language and often do not give it much thought, yet we do have a choice and we can make conscious decisions to use words and terms that say what we mean and give power, dignity and respect to all people. Most people want to be respectful of others yet may not realise how the language they use disempowers others.

We all need to re-examine the language we use and evaluate the meanings and connotations of our words, including their origins, in relation to, for example, persons with particular disabilities, who are HIV positive, or who belong to different ethnic groups. Some terms have different connotations in different contexts and cultures. The important thing is to recognise that terms do have connotations and find out what they are.

These guidelines for addressing people who are disadvantaged or marginalised do not dictate which terms should or should not be used. Rather they provide some guiding principles, gathered from a range of sources, intended to help raise awareness amongst WaterAid staff and the partners we work with about the language we use and issues surrounding disability, sexual orientation, age, race, HIV and gender.

Addressing people in a way that communicates power, dignity and respect

At WaterAid, we believe that everyone has equal rights, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, age, HIV or AIDS, race or disability. Treating all people with equal respect is the first step to overcoming barriers and creating a more just society.

How we address others is of utmost importance and should always be in a way that communicates power, dignity and respect for the other person.

The following five points[1] are important to remember:

1 **Uphold dignity and respect**. Put the person first, don't label the person with her or his physiological condition or appearance or gender.

2 **Acknowledge that all people have the same rights and the same basic needs** as well as different needs. All people have different abilities and inabilities. It is often not helpful to refer to someone as having 'special needs' or being 'differently able'.

3 **Do not assume on behalf of people.** It is inappropriate to assume and address someone as a victim, a sufferer, as being challenged or vulnerable. Older people, or people with an impairment might not feel frail or vulnerable. It is more relevant to talk about people in 'vulnerable situations' as this is something you can change – easy access to a latrine can stop women feeling vulnerable when they go out at night to defecate.

4 **Consider that what is normal to you may not be normal to others,** because of our personal and cultural differences or other backgrounds. People may fall into the category of majority or average, but everyone is normal and abnormal in one way or another.

5 **Use simple and clear language.** Sometimes it may be clearer to address a person as having 'difficulty walking' (or hearing, seeing etc) rather than as a person with 'mobility impairment'. Sometimes language used within certain groups may not communicate well to people from different linguistic, geographical, educational, cultural, or other social backgrounds.

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[1] World Vision (undated) *World Vision international guidelines on inclusion of persons with disabilities.* Available at http://beta.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Guidelines_on_Inclusion_of_Persons_with_Disabilities.pdf

Gender[2]

WaterAid believes that no person should be discriminated on the basis of gender.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles of men and women rather than the biologically determined differences, as well as the relationships between them in a given society at a specific time and place. These roles and relationships are not fixed but can and do change. They are usually unequal in terms of power, freedom, agency and status as well as access to and control over entitlements, resources and assets.

The differences between sex and gender are outlined in the table below.

Sex	Gender
Attributes are: • Born with • Biological characteristics • Universal • Not changeable	Attributes are: • Learned • Social characteristics • Diverse, culturally different • Changeable
Biological distinction/differences (male/female)	Social and cultural construction or interpretation of differences between the sexes (masculinity/femininity)

A number of terms are used in relation to gender. They include:

Gender equality
This means the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered and valued equally.

Gender mainstreaming
This term was defined by the United Nations in 1997 as 'a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated'.

Gender parity
This is a numerical concept. It requires that equal proportions of girls and boys or men and women are involved in a given activity.

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[2] Adapted from Global Water Partnership (2006) *Mainstreaming gender in integrated water resources management strategies and plans: Practical steps for practitioners, Technical Brief 5.* Available at http://www.gwptoolbox.org/images/stories/gwplibrary/technical/tb_5_english.pdf

Sexual orientation

People around the world face violence and inequality –sometimes torture and even execution – because of who they love, how they look, or who they are. Sexual orientation is often mistakenly considered to be fluid and flexible, creating the misperception that their sexual orientation is a matter of choice, not identity.

Authorities may not be able, or willing to protect people experiencing harassment based on their sexual orientation. Many lesbians, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex individuals experience mental health issues as a result of abuse, social isolation, homophobia and transphobia. They may be at risk of HIV infection and tend to have less access to critical prevention and care services. People who are HIV positive suffer from a double stigma.

WaterAid believes that sexual orientation should never lead to discrimination or abuse. We must always maintain a person's dignity and be respectful of all sexual orientations in our choice of language.

We recognise that being a lesbian or gay person is criminalised in several countries where WaterAid works, and that some people have strong objections based on their culture or religious beliefs. Nevertheless, discrimination based on sexual identity in relation to access to water, sanitation and hygiene is not acceptable in accordance with our work on equity and inclusion. Discrimination in the workplace is also unacceptable.

The following is a guide for appropriate and inappropriate language in relation to sexual orientation[3].

Usually appropriate	Usually not appropriate
Used as an adjective (not a noun): • **Lesbian**: A woman who's attracted to other women • **Gay**: A man who's attracted to other men. The term can be used to describe both gay men and lesbians • **Bisexual**: An individual who is attracted to both men and women • **Transgender**: People whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth	The word 'gay' should not be used as a noun, such as 'he is a gay'. These terms should be avoided: • Homosexual: In some contexts this is considered derogatory. • Same-sex The above terms indicate that sexual orientation is fluid and flexible. This creates the misperception that people's sexuality is a matter of choice, not identity

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[3] Adapted from UNHCR (2011) *Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons in forced displacement, Need to know guidance 2.* Available at http://www.unhcr.org.uk/

• **Intersex**: Bodily variations including variations at the level of chromosomes, gonads and genitals • LGBTI: Acronym meaning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex Such as 'he is gay' or 'a lesbian couple'.	
It is appropriate to use 'being gay', such as 'he talked about being gay'.	The following terms are derogatory: • Homosexuality • Lesbianism • 'That's so gay' (a negative insult)
Orientation, sexual orientation (refers to each person's capacity for attraction to, and intimate relations with individuals of a different or the same gender, or more than one gender).	Words that suggest that being gay is a choice and suggests that people are viewed through a sexual lens: • Sexual preference • Gay lifestyle or homosexual lifestyle • Same-sex attractions • Sexual identity

Usually appropriate	Usually not appropriate
The term 'transgender' (adjective) refers to people who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their sex at birth. For example: • Transgender person • Transgender inclusion One may also use the word 'transition' in reference to transgender people, such as, 'she began transitioning last year'.	Transgender is an adjective, and should not be used as a noun. Use a transgender person's chosen name and refer to the person using the pronoun of that gender. Avoid: • Transgendered • A transgender (used as a noun) • Transvestite • Tranny

Disability

The biggest problems for people with disabilities are obstacles in the environment and in society's perception of their value, not their particular impairment. WaterAid believes that all those responsible for providing water, sanitation and hygiene have a key role in reducing attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers and that no person should be discriminated against as a result of any impairment.

A number of different terms are used in relation to disability. They include:

Disability
Disability is a result of the limitations imposed on persons who have impairments by attitudinal, institutional, or environmental barriers to their participation in society. WaterAid separates 'disability' (social issue) from 'impairment' (medical or individual issue) in order to clearly see each of the two issues a person may be facing. To separate the two issues also enables us to take specific actions and approaches towards focused solutions.

Persons with disabilities, people with disabilities, disabled people or handicapped people
WaterAid uses the terms 'disabled people' and 'persons/people with disabilities' interchangeably. Some people or countries prefer one term over the other. 'Persons/people with disabilities' is a people-first language and takes a rights-based approach. (Strictly speaking, from the perspective of human rights, it is accurate to say 'persons with disabilities', although in general the term 'people with disabilities' is commonly used). 'Disabled people' is based on the social model of disability with the recognition that people who have impairments are disabled by social barriers. The term 'handicapped people' is still used in many countries but has connotations of begging (it is derived from 'cap in hand') and so its use is discouraged.

Disabled people's organisations and disability organisations
Disabled people's organisations (DPOs) are organisations represented and managed by and for people with disabilities, while disability organisations are managed by non-disabled people working for people with disabilities.

Mental illness, psychosocial disabilities, or mental retardation
Some people prefer to use the term 'mental illness' while others prefer 'psychosocial disabilities'. Both are used by WaterAid. However, 'mental retardation' seems to be the term people with disabilities/disabled people avoid (though it is still used by medical professionals).

Impairments
These include physical, sensory, neurological, intellectual, mental or any physiological long or short-term condition. Examples would include lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a limb/organ/mechanism of the body that does not function fully, effectively and/or efficiently.

Function/functional limitation
While impairments may affect functioning of your body organs, it may not necessarily affect your ability to perform or function in certain activities.

The terminology recommended/discouraged below is within the context of English language, and may not be relevant or appropriate in your language context. If you know rights-based and cross-impairment DPOs (concerning all impairment groups) in your community or country, they should be able to guide you. It is also good to ask persons with disabilities how they would like to be referred to.

Usually appropriate	Usually not appropriate
General	
• Person/people with disabilities/disability • Disabled person (persons/people) • Person who has an impairment • Non-disabled person • Person without disabilities	• Handicap, the handicapped, handicap person • The disabled, the impaired, impaired person • Afflicted, sufferers, unfortunate, victims • Person with special needs/talents/ abilities Specially gifted person • Able-bodied, normal person, healthy person
Person with physical impairment/disabilities	
• Person who has a physical impairment • Person with/who has difficulty walking (or moving) • Person using a wheelchair, wheelchair user	• Cripple, invalid, physically challenged, physically impaired (person) • Polio, polio victim • Wheelchair, wheelchair bound, confined to wheelchair
Person with sensory impairment/disabilities	
• Person who has visual (or hearing) impairment or blindness (or deafness) • Person with/who has difficulty seeing (or hearing or speaking) • Person who is hard of hearing • Person who is blind (or deaf) • Person who is partially sighted • Person who has communication difficulty	• The blind, visually impaired (person) • The deaf, hearing impaired (person) • Mute, dumb
Person with neurological impairment/disabilities	
• Person who has cerebral palsy • Person who has difficulty moving (or speaking) • Person who has epilepsy (or an epileptic seizure or spasm) • Person with spinal cord injury	• Spastic • Epileptic, the epileptic

HIV and AIDS

Globally, approximately 33 million women and men are living with HIV or AIDS. Unfortunately, these people are often marginalised as a result of stigma, discrimination and fear by those around them. WaterAid believes that every person has the right to water, sanitation and hygiene and that no person should be denied access to them because they have HIV or AIDS.

The following table shows the preferred terminology to use in relation to HIV or AIDS[4].

Appropriate	Not appropriate
Use the term that is most appropriate in the context, for example: • People living with HIV • HIV prevalence • HIV prevention • HIV testing • HIV-related disease • AIDS diagnosis • Children made vulnerable by AIDS, children orphaned by AIDS • The AIDS response • National AIDS programme • AIDS service organisation • Both HIV epidemic and AIDS epidemic are acceptable	• HIV/AIDS, HIV and AIDS (Use the term that is most specific and appropriate in the context to avoid confusion between HIV (a virus) and AIDS (a clinical syndrome).
• HIV (The virus associated with AIDS is called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV. There is no AIDS virus)	• AIDS virus
• Person living with HIV or HIV-positive person. (Avoid the term infected. No one can be infected with AIDS, because it is not an infectious agent)	• AIDS-infected
• HIV test or HIV antibody test (There is no test for AIDS)	• AIDS test
• Person living with HIV (Use the term AIDS only when referring to a person with a clinical AIDS diagnosis. The word 'victim' is disempowering)	• AIDS victim

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[4] Adapted from UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines (October, 2011). Available at
http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/document/2011/20111009_UNAIDS_Terminology_Guidelines_MidtermAdditions_en.pdf

Appropriate	Not appropriate
• Patient with advanced HIV-related illness (or disease) or AIDS-related illness (or disease) (Use the term patient only when referring to a clinical setting)	• AIDS patient
• Risk of HIV infection or risk of exposure to HIV	• Risk of AIDS
• Key populations at higher risk (both key to the epidemic's dynamics and key to the response) (Key populations are distinct from vulnerable populations, which may be subject to societal pressures or social circumstances which may make them more vulnerable to exposure to infections, including HIV)	• High(er) risk groups, vulnerable groups
• Sex work or commercial sex, or the sale of sexual services	• Commercial sex work
• Sex worker	• Prostitute
• Injecting drug user (Drugs may be injected subcutaneously, intramuscularly or intravenously)	• Intravenous drug user
• Using non-sterile injecting equipment (If referring to risk of HIV exposure, use 'using contaminated injecting equipment' if the equipment is known to contain HIV or if HIV transmission has occurred)	• Sharing (needles, syringes)
• Response to AIDS	• Fight against AIDS
• Evidence-informed	• Evidence-based
• HIV prevalence (The word 'rates' connotes the passage of time and should not be used in most instances)	• HIV prevalence rates

Age

Many older women and men in poor countries live in extreme poverty, do not have access to water and sanitation and are left out of important decision-making processes because of their age. However, WaterAid believes that older people can bring a huge amount of knowledge to families and communities and to the design of development projects. Their experience and voices need to be heard in relation to water, sanitation and health initiatives. WaterAid believes that no person should be discriminated against because of their age.

Growing older is not without its problems, which can prevent people from reaching their potential. It is important therefore to use language that does not portray older people as helpless or victims. Rather that they are people who may face barriers in people's attitudes, in institutions and in the physical environment that prevent their rights from being realised[5].

Appropriate	Not appropriate
• Older people	• The aged, the elderly or elderly people
• Use the words that older people prefer in your region, such as 'elders' or 'seniors'	
• Recipients, participants or older people	• Beneficiaries (this implies magnanimity on your part)

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[5] Help Age International (2009) *Ageways, practical issues in aging and development, Issue 73.* Available at www.helpage.org/download/4c597769bcdd2/

Race

WaterAid believes that no person should be discriminated against because of their race. As a result, we need to be careful about the language we use, both spoken and written, avoiding terms which are racist and which could cause offence. This can be difficult because language changes with time and some terms that were formerly appropriate are now more likely to cause offence. In addition, different terms are acceptable in different countries.

The following table is a guide to appropriate and inappropriate terms when talking about race in the UK context[6].

Appropriate	Not appropriate
• Of diverse heritage	• Half caste, mixed race
• Black (used as an adjective, not a noun) (This term is acceptable to use to describe people of African, Caribbean and Asian descent)	Terms that cause offence but are sometimes used unwittingly, in the mistaken view that they are acceptable:
• Black British (This term started to be used in the 1980s to stress the political unity between African, Caribbean and south Asian people in Britain. Now mainly used to refer to British descendants of first generation Caribbean migrants, or more broadly to all people of African or Caribbean descent living in Britain.)	• Non-white, coloured, negro, negress Terms that cause gross offence and must not be used: • Blackie, chink, coon, darkie, gippo, pikey, nigger, paki, sambo, spade, spook, wog, yid
• Black and minority ethnic (This term does not include minority ethnic groups in England who are white)	
• Visible minority ethnic (People whose ethnicity is obvious from their appearance or because they stand out from the majority group because of cultural or religious characteristics, eg wearing a hijab, niqab, cappel, tznuit etc)	

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[6] Equality Act (2010) chapter 15. Available at
http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/pdfs/ukpga_20100015_en.pdf

Suggested exercise

Explore what terminology is appropriate and inappropriate in a national or local context.

This group exercise was run in an equity and inclusion awareness workshop in Zambia in 2012. It provided an opportunity for participants to question the different terms that are used locally to describe people who are disabled, older, sick or belonging to a minority.

It is a simple exercise and it is ideal if there are participants who are disabled or from a disability organisation in the group to provide their perspectives on different terms. The following steps could be completed:

1. Ask participants to discuss in small groups what words are used locally to describe people who are disabled, older, sick or belong to a disadvantaged minority. Each group then writes the words on post-its or cards (one word per card).

2. The facilitator should write the criteria for words that are empowering and respectful on a flip chart or print out the page and distribute as handouts. The criterion are, uphold dignity and respect; acknowledge that all people have the same rights and the same basic needs; do not assume on behalf of people; consider that what is normal to you may not be normal to others and use simple and clear language. Details are on page 5 of this guide. Go through each of the criteria and discuss them briefly in plenary so that everyone understands what they mean.

3. Put up flip chart papers or a sticky cloth divided into three sections with three headings: Always appropriate, sometimes appropriate, never appropriate.

4. Now ask the participants to stick the cards with the different terms up under the relevant heading. The group can discuss in plenary the different words, how they are used by different people, and what they imply. The views of people who often experience discrimination, such as disabled people, older people, or people from marginalised groups are very helpful at this stage. If nobody in the group is sure about a particular word it can be put to one side to find out about later. There may be some words that can be used in different ways, some of which are appropriate and some that are not. These can go into the middle category.

   It is useful to discuss how some words may seem to be neutral but can be expressed in a way that is either empowering or disempowering. If they want to, people can share their own experiences about the use of language and how it makes them feel.

5. Finish the meeting by referring back to the criteria for language. Emphasise that language also changes over time and in different contexts. Some words are unacceptable in one context but acceptable in another. Words are also generational and meaning can change over time. For example, older people may use terms that have become unacceptable in the current context without meaning to be insulting.

6. It may be useful to type up the lists of words under the different categories and distribute them as a local terminology guide.