

The Language of Equality

A general consensus exists as to whether the terms below are acceptable or unacceptable in the UK. Some individuals may choose to self-identify in ways which are different to the general consensus, and they have a right to do this. However, terms which are deemed to be generally unacceptable should not be used within a workplace setting.

The acceptability of terminology differs depending on the country in question and so different rules apply in different countries in the world. This terminology document is related to the UK.

All language changes over time, and therefore acceptable and unacceptable terminology will also change. It is important to regularly update ourselves to make sure that we are using the most acceptable terms. If you are unsure it is worth speaking to people to find out how they would prefer to be identified.

Warning - There are some terms which are considered offensive which have been included in this list for clarity and to explain why they should not be used.

Black: (acceptable): The most accepted term in current use for people of African and/or African-Caribbean descent.

BAME (use with caution): This stands for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic and is a general term to describe the collective ethnic minority population, including white minority groups such as those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and Eastern Europeans. This is often used in formal communication and data collection. Many people are uncomfortable with a diverse group of people being reduced to an acronym, therefore use it with caution. It is better to use Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic in full than to use it as an acronym and should only be used where no more specific term is applicable.

Coloured (unacceptable): A term which is used indiscriminately to describe anybody who is not white. This term is not one which has been used by people to identify themselves, but one which has been ascribed by others. It is considered unacceptable due to this and its historical connection with racist attitudes and behaviours.

People of Colour (acceptable): A term, which originated in the United States of America, which is increasing in use in the UK to describe the experiences of people who are not of European heritage. It is often used to describe common experiences of systemic racism.

P*ki (unacceptable): This has been used as a term of abuse for many years. It is extremely offensive no matter how, when and why people say it, and should not be used. For a lot of people, the term stands for racism, hatred and conflict. A common argument is that the term is just an abbreviation of Pakistani and is therefore acceptable; however, because of the way the word has been and is still used, it is a damaging and hurtful term. The term also tends to be used generally for Asian people, irrespective of their national origins, such as Indian or Bangladeshi people.

Asian (acceptable but use with caution): Geographically confusing since it ought to include people from East Asia, but in common usage within the UK it does not. Probably for this reason 'South Asian' has been increasingly used to refer to those whose family background is from the Indian sub-continent. Many people prefer identification by country of heritage, for example Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani. Some British born people with Asian heritage may use British Asian.

West Indian (acceptable but use with caution): The term most widely used in the past for African-Caribbean people and may be acceptable for some, especially for older people born in the Caribbean. In essence it is an old colonial term derived from Columbus's mistake and besides, the West Indies no longer exist in any tangible form except as a cricket team.

African-Caribbean (acceptable): Widely used and acceptable to almost anyone of Caribbean heritage with historic African roots.

Ch*nky (unacceptable): A racist term for someone who is perceived to be of Chinese heritage.

Oriental (unacceptable): An old-fashioned term which was imposed on people from East Asia (For example: China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Thailand) by Western people. The term East Asian is preferable, but where possible identification by country of heritage is better. Often prefaced with British, e.g. British Chinese.

Ethnic(s) (unacceptable): A completely meaningless term, though widely used. It denies any ethnicity of white majorities and has patronising nuances of simplicity and primitiveness when applied as an adjective to handbags, clothing and art.

Ethnic Minority Group (acceptable): Technically accurate and can be used for all such groups or a particular one. The sequence minority ethnic group is often preferred as it keeps the words 'ethnic' and 'group' together to stress that everyone has ethnicity, but some ethnic groups are minorities. English residents in Wales are a minority ethnic group, as are Welsh residents in England.

Half Caste (unacceptable): An old-fashioned term used to describe someone of dual heritage. Caste derives from a Latin word meaning pure. Calling a person half caste implies that they are 'half pure' and fails to recognise their full identity.

Mixed Race (acceptable): An acceptable term, however, 'race' is problematic - the idea that people can be neatly divided into different races has been used in the past to justify the extremely poor treatment of one group of people by another. Since the advent of genetics, it has been proven that people cannot be divided into groups in this way and that there is only one race - the human race. With this in mind, some people reject the term 'mixed race' and instead use other terms such as 'mixed heritage' or 'dual heritage'.

Gypsy (acceptable but use with caution): There are many different Traveller communities and many would not describe themselves as Gypsies. English Gypsies and Scottish Gypsy / Travellers are distinct ethnic groups and must be distinguished from Irish Travellers, New Travellers, Show and Fairground people, Boat people and Roma. The term originated in the 1600's in the mistaken belief that the Romany nomadic people to whom it was applied were originally Egyptian, when they were actually of north Indian descent. Gypsy, Roma and Travellers or GRT is a shorthand umbrella term that can be used when referring generically to all of the different Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

P*key (unacceptable): It is an extremely offensive term used against Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. The term first appeared in common usage in the early 19th century and is derived from the word 'turnpike', a device traditionally used to collect toll from roads which Travellers often used.

Handicapped (unacceptable): Many disabled people regard 'handicapped' as offensive because of its strong historical associations with mental defectiveness, permanent incapacity and dependency. It also suggests an inability to succeed in a competitive environment.

Disabled People (acceptable): This term is advocated by Disability Rights UK. It recognises that people are disabled more by their society than by their impairment. Since the emergence of the disability rights movement, use of this term has come to signify solidarity with the collective identity.

People with disabilities (acceptable): This term has historically been considered positive, because it emphasises people with impairments are first and foremost people. However, while it is unlikely to cause actual offence, it has been rejected by the Disabled People's movement in the UK.

The disabled (unacceptable): Using terms like 'the disabled' tend to dehumanise people, identifying people in terms of their condition. They group together people who have no connection with each other, other than that they share a condition. If it is necessary to refer to a condition it is better to say, for example, 'people with a hearing impairment' or 'people with a visual impairment.'

Unacceptable	Acceptable
Affliction, handicap	Impairment, condition, disorder, difficulty
Sp*stics, epileptics: this term can dehumanise people, identifying them only in terms of their impairment. These are medically imposed labels which serve to stigmatise people.	People with cerebral palsy, people with epilepsy
Mental handicap, mental age of	Learning difficulties, learning disabilities, learning-disabled, severe or profound learning difficulties
Victim of, crippled by, suffering from, afflicted by	Person who has, person with
Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair	Wheelchair user, uses a wheelchair, has impaired mobility
The deaf	Deaf, partially deaf, profoundly deaf
The blind, visually challenged	Blind or partially sighted person, person with little or no sight, visually impaired person, visual impairment
Dumb	Person with a speech difficulty, person with non-verbal communication, person who uses verbal communication aids

Sexual Orientation: Who you are emotionally, mentally and physically attracted to based on their sex/gender in relation to your own. It is inappropriate to use the term 'sexual preference', as sexual orientation is not a choice.

Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, mentally and/or physically attracted to other women.

Gay: A man who is emotionally, mentally and/or physically attracted to other men. Also used as a generic term that covers both lesbians and gay men. Some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian.

Homosexual (unacceptable): The term homosexual is used to describe gay and lesbian people. However, it is best to avoid describing people as homosexual as there is a clinical history to the word, which has been used by anti-gay campaigners to suggest that gay people are somehow diseased or psychologically and emotionally disordered. Use of the word gay is preferred.

Heterosexual: The term heterosexual is used to describe a man who has an emotional, mental and/or physical attraction towards women or a woman who has an emotional, mental and/or physical attraction towards men.

Bisexual (Bi): Someone who is emotionally, mentally and/or physically attracted to more than one gender.

Pansexual: When someone's emotional, mental and/or physical attraction towards others is not limited by sex or gender.

Aromantic: No or little romantic attraction.

Asexual: No or little sexual attraction.

Queer (proceed with caution): Queer was historically used as a slur against LGBT+ people. However, it has been reclaimed as a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT+ community, such as racism and ableism. It is also used in academic studies. However, it is still perceived as a slur by some and should be used with caution by those who are not part of the community.

Heterosexism: The belief that heterosexuality is normal and the norm.

Heteronormativity: The social and cultural conditions that allow heterosexist and/or homophobic attitudes to exist.

Biological sex: The categorisation of people based on hormones, chromosomes and internal and external sex organs. Two sexes, male and female, are most common, however sex is not binary and there are people who are intersex and exhibit a combination of male and female characteristics.

Intersex: Where a person is born with a combination of male and female characteristics, such as hormones, chromosomes or internal and external sex organs.

Assigned sex: Used by some as an alternative to biological sex.

This acknowledges that someone (often a doctor) has assigned a label to that person based on their external sex organs.

Gender: A social construct in that children learn how to behave in a manner typically associated with their sex. This can include roles, clothes, emotional behaviours and interests.

Gender Expression: How a person chooses to outwardly express their gender, within the context of societal expectations of gender.

Gender Identity: A person's deeply felt psychological identification as a man, woman or some other gender. This may or may not correspond to that person's sex.

Trans/transgender (acceptable): A term which describes people whose gender identity is not aligned with the sex they are assigned at birth.

Transsexual (proceed with caution): An older term, still preferred by some people in the trans community who have permanently changed - or seek to change - their bodies through medical interventions. The word transsexual describes someone who transitions from male to female or vice versa, so does not encompass non-binary people. Many trans people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word transgender.

Cisgender: A term which describes people whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth. Cis-" is a Latin prefix meaning "on the same side as," and is therefore an antonym of "trans-."

Non-Binary: A term which describes people who experience their gender identity as falling outside the categories of man and woman. Some may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, as a combination of both or as wholly different from these terms.

Transphobia: A range of negative attitudes and feelings towards transgender people or people perceived to be transgender.

Transition: Transitioning is the process of changing one's gender and/or sex to align with one's gender identity. Transitioning can include some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one's family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transition vary from person to person.

Sex Change (inappropriate): Avoid the phrase sex change as transitioning doesn't necessarily have to involve changing one's sex or surgery of any sort. By using the phrase sex change it implies that a person's transition is not legitimate if it does not involve change of sex.

Gender Non-Conforming: A term which describes people who do not conform with the gender roles expected of them, including presentation, behaviours and interests. Not all gender non-conforming people are transgender.

'The girls in admin' (unacceptable): Adult women should be referred to as women not girls. There is no set age at which a girl becomes a woman, but a reasonable guide is that after 16 years of age a person is no longer a girl but rather a woman. Generally, no offence will be intended, but we should obviously not refer to adults as if they were children.

It is unnecessary (and bad practice) to add modifiers to a profession, for example, lady doctor or woman psychiatrist. This implies that the rightful owners of the profession are male and that it is an oddity for a woman to own this role. Similarly, such modifiers should not be applied to roles occupied by men, such as male nurse, male secretary.

Terms which sexualise, infantilise e.g. baby, or put women on a pedestal e.g. princess, are unacceptable in a professional workplace environment, despite common use outside the workplace.

**Care should be taken at all times to use gender-neutral terms, instead of genderspecific terms.
The following list might help:**

Gender-specific Terms	Gender-neutral Terms
Businessman/woman	Business person, manager, executive
Delivery Man	Delivery clerk, courier
Layman	Lay person
Spokesman/woman	Spokesperson, representative
Workman	Worker, operative, trades person
Cleaning Lady	Cleaner
Best man for the job	Best person for the job
Manpower	Jobs, staffing, human resources, labour force, personnel, workers, workforce
'manning the desk'	'Staffing the desk'

Harassment because of sex: Any unwanted conduct by an individual which has the purpose or effect of violating their dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment because of their sex. This is prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.

Sexual harassment: Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or

implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, or used as a basis for employment decisions, or has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment (Equality Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) definition). This is prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.

“I maintain that this struggle with language has to be worth it...how can it not be right to watch what we say and avoid offence, or to address people and describe them in terms they find acceptable? If education is not the place to observe and reflect upon language I am not sure where it could be done” C Gain (2005)

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