

# CODE OF GENDER-SENSITIVE COMMUNICATION AT BUT

“Language doesn’t just describe reality—  
it helps create it.”

The recommendations in this manual are not binding, their application is left to the individual’s decision. However, the BUT recommends the use of these principles in documents as well as presentations and speeches.

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# Introduction

The **Code of Gender Sensitive Communication at BUT** defines the approach in the setting and implementation of communication reflecting all persons at Brno University of Technology (BUT) in an appropriate manner.

## Why is this topic important?

- At the BUT, we strive for gender equality and a fair environment for everyone.
- Not only the content of the communication, but also its form is important to us.
- Language and visual communication are part of our institution's PR.

Gender-sensitive language accurately and fairly describes the reality and reaches all the people for whom the message is intended. It does not ridicule, objectify or discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender identity, expression, sexuality or any social or physical characteristics.

## Who is the code for?

- Academic and non-academic community of the University.
- All those who communicate internally and externally.
- All those who are interested in this topic or want to better understand it.

# Main objectives

- Identification of the main communication shortcomings (linguistic, visual, symbolic and situational).
- Introduction of the principles of gender-sensitive communication and measures which can be taken to improve the communication culture at the BUT.
- Formulation of recommendations for the different forms of communication used in public meetings, speeches, conferences, meetings within academic bodies, in letters, e-mails, articles, publications and other presentations of the BUT, including scientific research results.

We see the implementation of gender-sensitive communication at the BUT as part of a cultural change of the entire institution. The use of gender-balanced and inclusive language helps to combat gender stereotypes, encourages a change in social attitudes and contributes to achieving gender equality.

# Levels of communication

- Linguistic (written, spoken)
- Visual (social media, promotional materials)
- Symbolic (how the institution presents itself externally)
- Situational (conduct and communication in specific situations)

The Toolkit on Gender-sensitive Communication provides guidelines for the use of gender-sensitive language. Although it provides tips and examples for the English language, the underlying principles for gender-sensitive writing are universal and remain relevant when using other languages.

# Linguistic level of communication

## Why do we talk about gender in language?

All languages change and evolve under the influence of many internal and external factors. These include political and social changes, on both domestic and international level, concerning the position of women and their role in society.

Women play an active role in society, but language is often used in a way that ignores or downplays their contribution. Words matter in shaping our view of the world. For example, the prevalence of masculine word forms for general reference can reflect assumptions about gender roles and influence readers.

## Specificity of the generic masculine in some languages

For English speakers, the concept of the generic masculine may be somewhat unusual, as English does not use this linguistic phenomenon to such an extent as other languages, including Czech, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, Greek, Dutch, Serbian, Croatian and Russian.

A generic masculine is the name of a person in the masculine grammatical gender, which is perceived as gender-neutral (generic) and thus performs a proxy function for both genders. In the Czech language, a typical example is the designations of occupations and professions (sociolog = male sociologist, právník = male lawyer, řidič = male driver, doktor = male doctor). In English, this phenomenon occurs much less frequently. For example, the word “freshman” is now being replaced by the gender-neutral expression “first-year student”.

The advantage of the generic masculine is the simplification of communication. The disadvantage is the fundamental invisibility of women. Therefore, its use is considered discriminatory. Masculine generics have a major impact on life choices and the division of labour. Up to 25% fewer women apply for a position advertised using the generic masculine. We are introduced to its use at an early age, and most of us find it natural and unproblematic. This is evidenced, for example, by a test asking children to ‘draw a scientist’. In languages without gender variants, children draw both male and female scientists. In languages for which grammatical genders are essential, children draw scientists who look almost exclusively like men if given a “generic” masculine form of the word.

Link to the video: [A Class That Turned Around Kids' Assumptions of Gender Roles!](#) (Youtube.com)



If our aim is to address all the people to whom our message is intended—including women—the use of the generic masculine in the above languages does not seem to be an appropriate strategy.

### When the language is sexist

It is not only in Czech that we often find expressions or phrases that are stereotypical or sexist. Examples include “**drama-queen**”, “**to man up**”, “**lady-like**” or “**career woman**”.

Language affects not only how we speak or write, but also how we think.

Visibility in language leads to greater representation in reality.

If we refer to women in the context of their professions using the masculine forms of words, women are rendered invisible. For the BUT, this fact is many times truer, because it concerns fields where historically there have not been many women and their entry into the “male” sphere started relatively recently.

## Gender-blind language

- The use of masculine word forms to refer to women in languages where gender presents a grammatical category
- Overlooking the diversity of groups
- Promoting stereotypes

## Masculine generics in the environment of universities and research institutions in the Czech Republic

- The generic masculine often appears in internal regulations (e.g. **uchazeč = male applicant, student = male student, výzkumník = male researcher**)
- The generic masculine is also included in the provisions of the Higher Education Act relating to awarding of academic degrees. These include **bakalář = male Bachelor, magistr = male Master and doctor = male Doctor**. There is, however, no legal provision that stipulates the exclusive use of the masculine grammatical gender. It is a question of common usage rather than a prescribed form of communication.
- However, the BUT subscribes to anti-discrimination standards and the human rights tradition of both Czech and foreign universities based on the principles of democracy, and strives to be competitive internationally, ensuring that all incomers, regardless whether students or employees, experience a safe and non-discriminatory working and study conditions. That is why it promotes gender-sensitive language in the university forms and internal documents, even though it is not required to do so by any legal regulation.

## Overview of problematic aspects

- Avoid using masculine pronouns for generic reference.
- Alternate the order of genders (**men and women/women and men**).
- Use gender-neutral words (**chairperson, chair** - not “**chairman**”, **police officer** - not “**policeman**”, **flight attendant** - not “**stewardess**”).
- Use “**Distinguished guests**” instead of “**Ladies and Gentlemen**”.



## Other problematic aspects

- **Avoid** gender-stereotypical phrases and adjectives when describing women and men (e.g., **members of the fairer sex**, **girls from the study department**, **strong men**).
- **Do not label** as exceptions women/men who act in less typical roles.
- **Names and academic degrees.** We provide both in the same mode for all people mentioned: for example, instead of **“Ing. Petr Novák and his wife”** use **“Ing. Petr Novák and MUDr. Hana Nováková”**.
- **Do not use the term “Miss”**, which gives the impression of immaturity, inexperience and inferior competence (the male equivalent of which is also not used as we do not usually look for marital status in men).
- In order to make women’s contributions more visible, foreign female names that do not signal gender may be given in full (in journal articles, for example).

## Tips for email communication

It is important to use the correct format when emailing with your community, whether they are students, employees or colleagues. It is not always possible to know how to correctly address someone if you have not been in contact with them before.

Example:

You can use the following sentence at the end of emails to make everyone feel properly addressed: **“We wish to address you respectfully. Please let us know if you prefer a different salutation.”**

## More examples of appropriate email and written communication

- Instead of the salutation **“Dear Sir/Madam”** use **“Dear Colleague”**, **“Dear Students”** or **“To whom it may concern”**.
- **“They/them”** as gender-neutral alternatives to **“he/she”**, e.g. **“Each student should bring their own lunch”** instead of **“Each student should bring his or her own lunch”**.
- Offer the option **“Mx.”** as a neutral alternative to **“Mr.”** or **“Ms.”**.
- Use **“Dr.”** or **“Professor”** regardless of the addressee’s gender.
- Use gender-neutral terms when describing job positions, e.g. **“cleaner”** instead of **“cleaning lady”**.
- In academic texts cite and refer to diverse authors regardless of their gender.

This will promote an atmosphere of understanding and respect for everyone with whom you communicate electronically.

## Language and gender non-binarity

- Gender is a non-binary category, i.e. it includes not only men and women, but also people who do not identify as such on the basis of biological sex (intersex people) or gender identity (trans people), including people who do not “see” themselves in any of these categories (agender, non-binary people, etc.).

- How to include in the language people who perceive themselves as gender non-binary and do not feel they are being addressed by the language as it is commonly used?
- Use “**they/them**” to refer to non-binary individuals: **this year they were awarded...for their novel.**
- In the Czech environment, people are gradually getting into the habit of adding their personal pronouns (e.g. **he/him, she/her, they/them**) to their business cards or email signatures. It may seem unusual, but it is a way of showing how one wishes to be addressed and referred to.

## Visual level of communication

Gender-sensitive communication is also important in pictorial, photographic, and other graphic materials such as pictograms and emoticons. Here, too, the aim is to have the widest possible range of depictions and to try to challenge traditional ideas of what is typically “boyish/ masculine” or “girly/feminine”.

This may concern:

- **colours** and their shades (blue for boys, pink for girls),
- **patterns**, e.g. on clothes, textiles (flowers × cars),
- **characteristics** (“diligent female student” × “active male student”),
- **types of activities and tools** (a male student working with instruments, a female student reading a book),
- **professions** (female nurse, male technician),
- **pictograms, emoticons** and other graphic symbols.

The above list of visual communication is often cited in connection with gender stereotypical or insensitive language.

## Presentations, promotional items and materials, campaigns, social networks

- Visual presentations, charts, and pictograms should represent men and women in comparable numbers, sizes, and positions (in terms of symbolic connotations).
- Visualizations should avoid stereotyping (man as intellectually gifted vs. women as mere decorative objects) and linguistic constructions such as the **the fairer sex**.
- Avoid sexist and ‘titillating humour’.
- Support and promote underrepresented groups.
- Visuals should **invite participation through both text and image**.

## Advertising and recruitment process

Do not use gender-specific job titles, such as **“salesman”** or **“cleaning lady”** in the text of job advertisements. This would suggest that no person of a different gender identity has a chance of being hired, even if they have the necessary skills and work experience, which means discrimination.

### Correct

- **Salesperson**
- **Cleaner**

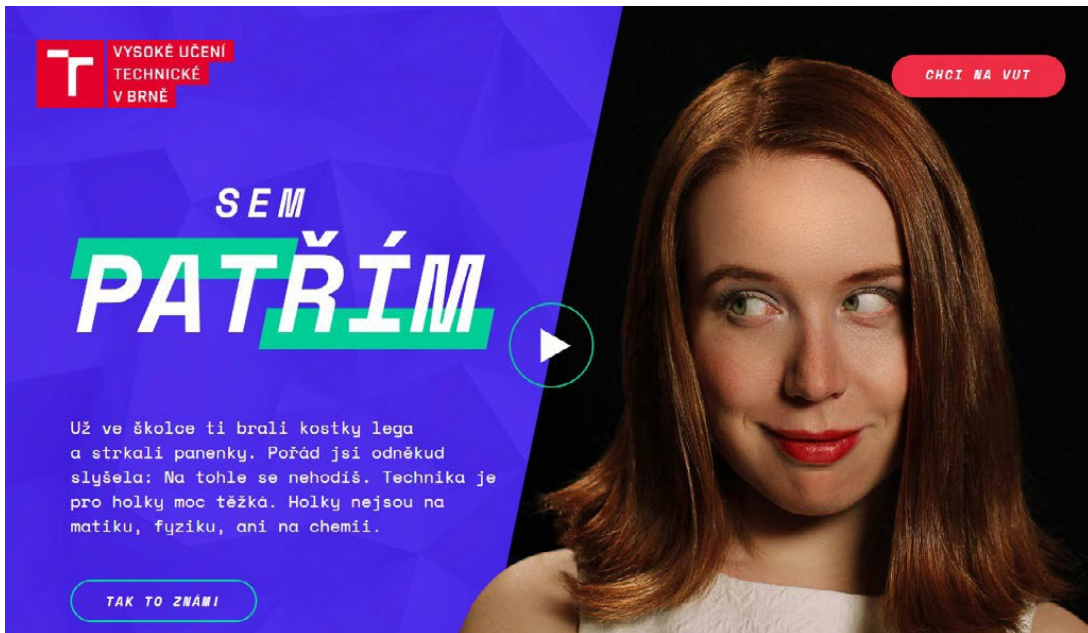
### Inappropriate

- **We are looking for a good-looking saleswoman**
- **We are looking for a female receptionist**

## An example of good practice - video

The aim of the BUT “**I Belong Here**” campaign was to challenge gender stereotypes, to show that “women do not need to be afraid of technical fields” and to attract more to study at the university.

Link to video: [I Belong Here](#) (Youtube.com)



## “A Class That Turned Around Kids’ Assumptions of Gender Roles!”

Link to video: [A Class That Turned Around Kids’ Assumptions of Gender Roles!](#) (Youtube.com)



## An example of bad practice - video

The promo video **Wolf from BUT (FEEC)** is a prime example of inappropriate communication. It promotes gender stereotypes, shows women as subordinate sex objects, and does not shy away from sexist humour.

Link to the video: [Vlk z VUT - Wolf from BUT](#). The video is only Czech. (Youtube.com)



## Symbolic level of communication

- How the institution communicates outwardly and inwardly, what linguistic and visual means it uses to do so.
- Creating an impression, mood and atmosphere in the workplace.
- Who speaks for the institution, who is its face.
- It is possible to choose different communication styles in relation to the different target audiences.
- The same applies to communication on social media and with the scientific community.

## Basic rules of gender-sensitive symbolic communication

- The institution's commitment to the principles of fairness.
- The use of gender-sensitive language in internal communication.
- Making women scientists and their work visible within the institution. Presenting female role models on the web, in teaching, and on the premises.
- The use of gender sensitive language in candidate selection procedures. The possibility of explicitly stating that women are welcome in the advertisement of new positions.
- A commitment to gender balance could also be included in the rules for the composition of evaluation and selection panels.
- Representation of the institution by both men and women. Aim for balanced representation and do not settle for nor be satisfied with the situation when, for example, the women approached did not have time to participate. The available database of female experts can be used.
- Gender-balanced expression alone will not change society, but it must accompany the changes taking place in society.

## Situational level of communication

- How we communicate and act in certain situations (with colleagues, with superiors and subordinates).
- Who delegates what tasks to whom, who is in charge of "service" jobs (making coffee, cleaning the lab, taking minutes of meetings, preparing materials), who interrupts in meetings, whose idea is appreciated, etc.
- The existence of a double standard for women and men by which their behaviour and actions are judged.

Language is a tool, let's not be afraid to use it.

The language should make communication polite and pleasant to both women and men and, at the same time, maintain clarity of expression.

# How to do it?

The way in which the principle of gender sensitivity in language is reflected in a text depends largely on the **type of text** and the stylistic layer of language used.

The text should reflect that the chosen solution is appropriate for the type of text and its future use, while ensuring sufficient visibility of all people for whom the text is intended:

- We recommend gender inclusivity when **writing project proposals**.
- When writing **emails**, we **address** the recipients appropriately. Instead of “Ladies and Gentlemen” use “Distinguished guests.” Addressing women as girls, honey, sweetie, babe, love, etc. is a taboo.
- With the utmost regard for the need for clarity, we should avoid using language that is not gender inclusive in **legislative acts** whenever possible.

Unbiased language is more likely to be accepted by users if it is natural and non-intrusive.

# Where to find information?

- Brno University of Technology; website Equal Opportunities, <https://www.vut.cz/en/but/employee-support/equal-opportunities>
- European Institute for Gender Equality; website Gender-sensitive communication, Toolkit on Gender-sensitive Communication, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-sensitive-communication>
- National Contact Centre for Gender & Science (originally “for women and science”), <https://www.soc.cas.cz/en/department/national-contact-centre-gender-science>
- The Gender Expert Chamber of the Czech Republic, [www.gekcr.cz/en](http://www.gekcr.cz/en)
- Czech Women’s Lobby, [czlobby.cz](http://czlobby.cz) | Czech women’s lobby
- GenPORT, <https://www.genderportal.eu/>



# Videos

Youtube, Is English sexist? | Learn English | Canguro English, 2016.  
Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dc3cWHCPFYw>

Youtube, Gender Sensitivity in the Workplace, 2022.  
Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsqGxFx9-QE>

# Resources

European Parliament, Gender pay gap in Europe: facts and figures, 2023.  
Available from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20200227STO73519/gender-pay-gap-in-europe-facts-and-figures-infographic>

Antidiscrimination Act; in the Czech Republic is governed by Law No. 198/2009 Sb. (Czech - Zákon o rovném zacházení a o právních prostředcích ochrany před diskriminací a o změně některých zákonů, 1. 9. 2009.  
Available from: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2009-198> (only Czech)

GenderSAFE; 2024. Available from: <https://gendersafe.eu/>

Council of Europe; Gender-Sensitive Communication - presentation, 2020.  
Available from: <https://rm.coe.int/training-gers-2020-gender-sensitive-communication/1680a06147>

Center for Women's Economic Empowerment (CIPE40); Inclusive Communication: Gender-Sensitive, Inclusive and Accessible Language, 2022. Available from: <https://www.cipe.org/resources/inclusive-communication-gender-sensitive-inclusive-and-accessible-language/>

European Institute for Gender Equality; Toolkit on gender-sensitive communication, 2019.  
Available from: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/toolkit-gender-sensitive-communication>

