

# Guideline on discrimination-sensitive language in the field of migration and health (as of 25.03.2023)

*This guideline contains basic principles around the topic of discrimination-sensitive language. It is an orientation for responsible communication in public health research and invites people to critically examine and reflect on their own use of language.*

## Why is discrimination-sensitive language important?

Language is not only used for the mere transmission of information. It conveys values and shapes social discourse. It can hurt, produce and perpetuate exclusions and hierarchies - even unintentionally. Therefore, it is important to use a diversity-conscious language that is as free of discrimination as possible - both in exchanges with each other and in academic communication (e.g. publications, lectures). The following basic principles of language use were developed in an action research process.

### 1. Avoid generalisations

Our society is characterised by its heterogeneity. Reflect this in how you express yourself. Always present facts in a differentiated way and avoid sweeping and generalising statements for entire population groups.

### 2. Formulate in a discrimination-sensitive way

Check which associations can be evoked by your phrases. A good strategy to check whether they can be discriminatory is to imagine that these associations or attributions refer to you (e.g. religious affiliation, appearance, name).

### 3. Consider self and external designations

In contrast to self-designations (e.g. *People of Colour*, see overview of relevant terms and concepts), external designations are designations attributed to groups of people (e.g. *refugees*, see overview of relevant terms and concepts). If possible, use the self-designations of the

respective communities. In addition, consider whether descriptions and attributions (e.g. indication of origin) are relevant in the respective context or can just as well be omitted. The following always applies: Whether formulations are hurtful and/or discriminatory is ultimately decided by the people they refer to.

### 4. Terms are subject to constant change

Language changes continuously. Terms and categories reflect current social conditions and realities. Even if they were once unproblematic, they can take on a negative meaning (e.g. *asylum seeker*, see overview of relevant terms and concepts).

### 5. Openly communicate own uncertainties

Because language is constantly changing, it is natural that there will always be uncertainties about the terms and categories used. Openly address your insecurities, make mistakes and also point out ascriptive or discriminatory expressions to colleagues. Appreciative feedback encourages reflection and strengthens a culture of discussion that is sensitive to discrimination.

Please send your feedback, comments and suggestions to: [migration@rki.de](mailto:migration@rki.de)

#### Further reading:

Neue deutsche Medienmacher\*innen NdM Glossary  
<https://glossar.neuemedienmacher.de/glossar/>

Deutsche Aidshilfe e.V. (2021) Leitfaden - Diskriminierungssensible Sprache in Aids- und Selbsthilfe  
[https://www.aidshilfe.de/sites/default/files/documents/2021\\_03\\_12\\_leitfaden\\_diskriminierungssensible\\_sprache.pdf](https://www.aidshilfe.de/sites/default/files/documents/2021_03_12_leitfaden_diskriminierungssensible_sprache.pdf)

AntiDiskriminierungsbüro (ADB) Köln / Öffentlichkeit gegen Gewalt e.V. (ed.) (2013) Sprache schafft Wirklichkeit (Language creates reality)  
<https://www.uni-hamburg.de/gleichstellung/download/antirassistische-sprache.pdf>

Arndt, Susan, and Nadja Ofuatey- Alazard, eds. (2011) *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. A critical reference work.* 1st ed. Münster: Unrast-Verlag.

