

# 2. LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

VSO's use of language and imagery is fundamental to our response to HIV and AIDS. Using simple, factual, consistent, gender-sensitive and non-discriminatory language gets our messages over clearly and tackles stigma.

In particular, it is important to avoid using abbreviations or acronyms to refer to groups of people, to always seek written consent for the use of life stories and photographs and to use positive images wherever possible and appropriate.



## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

HIV and AIDS is a complex medical and social issue and deals with material that is of a sensitive nature, so it is extremely important that care is taken to ensure accuracy of content and that language and imagery do not perpetuate stigma and discrimination. The language used in relation to HIV and AIDS is full of acronyms and the terminology is constantly changing. This makes it very important to explain clearly what is meant.

## VSO'S POSITION

VSO has developed guidelines called *The Power of the Word* as a way of promoting the use of appropriate language in relation to HIV and AIDS. Most of the terms we suggest using have been debated and agreed by people living with HIV and AIDS.

PROBLEMATIC TERMINOLOGY	PREFERRED TERMINOLOGY	EXPLANATION
HIV/AIDS Hiv/Aids HIV/aids	<b>HIV and AIDS</b> HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome	An oblique implies either/or, but HIV and AIDS are not the same and should be distinguished as different medical stages of being infected. Capital letters are generally used for abbreviations and acronyms, and as 'HIV' and 'AIDS' are so widely accepted and understood, there is no need to write them out in full.
AIDS virus	<b>HIV virus</b>	This can cause confusion between the two distinct phases of HIV and AIDS diagnosis. The virus is HIV.
AIDS test	<b>HIV test</b>	The most commonly used test detects HIV antibodies in the blood. A person is clinically diagnosed as having AIDS if they develop an AIDS-defining illness, such as an opportunistic infection.
Full-blown AIDS	<b>AIDS</b>	When the correct distinction between HIV and AIDS is made, there is no need to use the term 'full-blown AIDS'.
Catching AIDS	<b>Contract HIV or become HIV positive</b>	It isn't possible to catch AIDS. It is possible to 'contract' or 'become infected with' HIV, but even this is misleading as it suggests transmission is similar to colds or flu.
PLWHA	<b>People living with HIV and AIDS</b>	Written out in full, this is an appropriate term to refer to people with HIV and AIDS. However, the contracted form should be avoided, as using an abbreviation to refer to a group of people is dehumanising.

PROBLEMATIC TERMINOLOGY	PREFERRED TERMINOLOGY	EXPLANATION
Carrying AIDS/ AIDS carrier/ AIDS positive	<b>Person living with HIV or person living with HIV and AIDS</b>	'Carrying AIDS' confuses the two distinct phases of being infected with HIV, and having AIDS. People 'have' AIDS, they don't 'carry' it. 'Living with HIV and AIDS' reflects the fact that many people continue to lead their life with the virus, and it does not imply that HIV and AIDS makes up their whole identity.
AIDS sufferer AIDS victim		Being HIV positive doesn't mean being ill all the time. Many people living with HIV and AIDS continue to work and live a normal life after diagnosis. 'Sufferer' or 'victim' is therefore inaccurate and such terms are negative and disempowering.
Innocent victim		This term suggests anyone else with living with HIV and AIDS is guilty and deserving of this diagnosis.
Commercial sex workers or CSW	<b>Sex workers</b>	There is no need to state 'commercial' as this is implied.
CABA, OVC	<b>Current preferred: children affected by HIV and AIDS</b> Also used: <b>orphans and other vulnerable children</b>	There are many expressions currently in use to express the vulnerability of children infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Many are acceptable, but the abbreviations should be avoided.
MSM or men who have sex with men	<b>Males who have sex with males</b>	Avoid using 'men' in this context. 'Man' refers to someone's socially constructed gender identity, while 'male' is biological. Many males are challenging the traditional identity of 'men'. Avoid the abbreviation, for the reasons given above.
High-risk group	<b>Key populations at higher risk</b>	It is clear that there is high-risk behaviour, however, referring to groups as high risk exacerbates stigma. 'Key populations at higher risk' is more appropriate.
Plague	<b>Epidemic (one country) or Pandemic (global)</b>	Plague suggests a contagious disease, which HIV is not. The use of the term 'plague' also exacerbates the stigma that many people living with HIV and AIDS experience.

## KEY PRINCIPLES

- Explain what is meant clearly and write out abbreviations in full – particularly those that refer to people.
- Avoid jargon.
- Always seek written consent for the use of life stories and photographs, and ensure people understand how these will be used. Ensure a copy of pictures and stories are given to the people they are about.
- Avoid stereotyping individuals or groups through the use of images or language.
- Avoid reinforcing stigma, and use positive images wherever possible and appropriate.
- Involve people living with HIV and AIDS in decisions and discussions about language and imagery.
- Use VSO's *The Power of the Word* document for appropriate terminology, or for more detail consult the *UNESCO Guidelines on Language and Content in HIV- and AIDS-related Materials*.

## RESOURCES

- UNESCO (2006) *UNESCO Guidelines on Language and Content in HIV- and AIDS-Related Materials*:  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001447/144725e.pdf>



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