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WHAT?

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**How to Talk about Trans and Gender Non Conforming  
People, Youth and People in the Sex Trade Respectfully**  
**FIERCE, STREETWISE AND SAFE (SAS), AND TRANSJUSTICE OF THE AUDRE LORDE PROJECT**



This guide has been developed to support journalists, reporters, activists and organizers in using more inclusive and transformative language and frameworks when addressing issues that relate to our most vulnerable community members' experiences of discriminatory policing.

We hope that by sharing our language and analysis, media outlets, reporters, journalists and photographers will be able to report on and share our stories in ways that support and center our communities and our work



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## Who We Are

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This media guide was created by [FIERCE](#), [Streetwise and Safe \(SAS\)](#), and the [Audre Lorde Project](#). We are all organizations based in New York City, housed in the Miss Major Jay Toole Building for Social Justice, and members of Communities United for Police Reform.



*The Miss Major-Jay Toole Building for Social Justice*, located in Chelsea, houses organizing projects for and by people of color, and poor/low income lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit and gender nonconforming people in New York City.

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<http://www.mmjt.org>



**FIERCE** is a membership-based organization building the leadership and power of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth of color in New York City. We develop politically conscious leaders who are invested in improving ourselves and our communities through youth-led campaigns, leadership development programs, and cultural expression through arts and media. FIERCE is dedicated to cultivating the next generation of social justice movement leaders who are dedicated to ending all forms of oppression.

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<http://www.fierceny.org>

**Streetwise and Safe (SAS)** is a multi-strategy initiative working to build and share leadership, skills, knowledge and community among LGBTQ youth of color who experience criminalization, particularly in the context of the policing of poverty, "quality of life" offenses, and involvement or perceived involvement in survival economies. We conduct "know your rights" workshops specifically tailored to LGBTQ youth of color where we share critical information about rights in the criminal legal system as well as strategies to increase safety and reduce the harms of interactions with police. SAS works to create opportunities for LGBTQ youth of color to claim a seat at policy discussion tables as full participants, speak out on their own behalf, act collectively to protect and advance their rights, and demand choices that allow them to maximize their safety, self-sufficiency, and self-determination.



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<http://www.streetwiseandsafe.org/>



**The Audre Lorde Project (ALP)** is a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans and Gender Non Conforming People of Color center for community organizing, focusing on the New York City area. Through mobilization, education and capacity-building, we work for community wellness and progressive social and economic justice. Committed to struggling across differences, we seek to responsibly reflect, represent and serve our various communities.

<http://www.alp.org>

**TransJustice**, an organizing program of ALP, is a Trans and Gender Non-Conforming people of color (TGNC POC) political group working to mobilize its communities and allies into action on the pressing political issues they face, including gaining access to jobs, housing, and education; the need for Trans-sensitive healthcare, HIV-related services, and job-training programs; resisting police, government and anti-immigrant violence.

<http://www.alp.org/tj>

**Communities United for Police Reform** is an unprecedented campaign to end discriminatory policing practices in New York, bringing together a movement of community members, lawyers, researchers and activists to work for change. The partners in this campaign come from all 5 boroughs, from all walks of life and represent many of those most unfairly targeted by the NYPD. This groundbreaking campaign is fighting for reforms that will promote community safety while ensuring that the NYPD protects and serves all New Yorkers. We are a movement that is here to stay – a Campaign that will be a visible, lasting presence on the streets of neighborhoods citywide. We will be in communities and on the streets, educating people about their rights; and in the courts and on the steps of City Hall and the state capitol, demanding change to the NYPD -- until these policies end.



<http://www.changethenypd.org>

## Why This Guide

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- Media is an important and necessary tool that can have great power and influence over how our communities are perceived.
- Media can have serious negative consequences and cause further harm to members of our communities most directly impacted by discriminatory policing practices.
- Media can be a way for communities to be empowered to speak their truths in ways that are meaningful for them.
- Media can raise awareness and support our campaign and community organizing work.

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We have found that even well intentioned media coverage often uses stigmatizing, criminalizing, and pathologizing language that isolates and divides our communities by identifying some of us as criminals and stereotypes, or dangerous to society based on our race, class, gender, sexuality, mental and physical ability and immigrant status.

We know that if we can change the language media uses about our communities, we can begin changing the overall culture's language and perceptions of us as objects, animals, dangerous or criminals.

## Terms to Steer Away From and Why

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The words we use to describe and identify ourselves are often radically different from the language mainstream media uses to describe us. Sometimes, the language used by media can be incredibly harmful, hurtful, and perpetuate negative stereotypes about us.

The power to self-identify, and have agency over the terms and labels we use for ourselves and that others use to refer to us, is not only empowering for our communities, it is also a way that members of the media can show solidarity and respect for us, and can break down stereotypes and misconceptions about us.

Something as simple as not presuming someone's gender identity can be a powerful way to honor someone's gender expression. **Whenever possible, it is best to ask what terms, pronouns (He/Him,She/Her,They/Them), etc. the person uses and prefers for themselves.**

We want to offer the terms that we use to describe ourselves and our work in the hopes that members of the media will choose to use them rather than using terms that cause harm to us and our communities.

Here are a few examples of words that can be harmful/hurtful and some other terms and labels that we do prefer.

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**Harmful**

Transsexual/Transvestite/Tranny/Drag Queen - Referring to Trans or gender nonconforming people

**Example**

“Transsexuals are taking over the village”

“Drag Queens want equal rights”

**Why is it Harmful?**

“I DON’T LIKE THE WORD “TRANNNY” BECAUSE ITS OFTEN THE WORD THAT YOU HEAR BEFORE YOU GET ATTACKED. IT MIGHT BE THE LAST WORD YOU HEAR.”

- TransJustice Member

There are many different identities that fall under the umbrella term trans, and while some people may choose to use or identify these terms for themselves like transsexual or drag queen, it is not appropriate to choose these terms for someone else. It is critical to let people name their own gender expression and identity for themselves based on a long history of criminalization and pathologizing of trans identities that has simplified gender expressions outside of the binary gender norm as ‘abnormal’ or a ‘disease’. These terms are also often used to degrade, silence, and dehumanize TGNC people.

If you are writing about an individual, it is incredibly important to only refer to that person by their preferred gender pronoun.

**Some Preferred Terms**

Trans, Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Queer, Transmasculine, Transfeminine, Female to Male, Male to Female.

**Example**

“Transgender people fight for healthcare”

“Robin, who was assigned female at birth, now identifies as a trans man. He works with young people to end discrimination in high schools”

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**Harmful**

Homosexual

**Example**

“NYPD arrests homosexuals in porn shop”

**Why it is Harmful?**

“THE TERM HOMOSEXUAL IS HARMFUL BECAUSE OF THE MEDICAL INDUSTRY’S HISTORY OF PATHOLOGIZING US, AND MAKING IT SEEM LIKE WE COULD BE FIXED”

- Alok Vaid Menon, Audre Lorde Project

The term “homosexual” is shaming and stigmatizing, and defines the person’s identity based on a clinical term for their presumed sexual conduct. Scientifically and medically this term has been used to associate our communities to deviance, disease and an aptitude for violence and abuse.

**Some Preferred Terms**

If you are reporting on a particular individual, it is best to ask them and respect how they would prefer to be described. Generally speaking, the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer are preferred. Some communities prefer the term “same gender loving”.

**Example**

“Gay man arrested in porn shop”

“LGBT communities lead fight to end profiling”



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**Harmful**

Minority - used to refer to non-white people. Sometimes also used to refer to “sexual minorities.”

**Example**

“Stop and frisk targets minority communities.”

**Why it is Harmful?**

“MINORITY IS HARMFUL BECAUSE IT MAKES IT FEEL LIKE THERE AREN’T ENOUGH OF US TO ACTUALLY HAVE A VOICE, OR COLLECTIVE POWER, OR A SAY IN WHAT HAPPENS TO US. IT JUSTIFIES LEAVING US BEHIND “

- ALP Member

The term minority diminishes the communities it refers to, suggesting that the individuals who are part of these communities are outliers, “others” whose rights do not matter as much as those of the “majority.” It is also inaccurate - people of color make up the majority of the population in New York City and many other parts of the United States. People of color are also the majority of the global population.

**Some Preferred Terms**

People of color; Communities of color; Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities

**Example**

“Stop and frisk targets people of color.”

“Communities of color in New York City are under siege.”



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**Harmful**

“illegal aliens” - illegal immigrants

**Example**

“Illegal Aliens flood the job market”

**Why it is Harmful?**

“THE TERM “ILLEGAL ALIEN” DEHUMANIZES IMMIGRANTS AND OPENS THE DOOR TO RACIAL PROFILING AND VIOLENCE AND PREVENTS TRUTHFUL, RESPECTFUL DEBATE ON IMMIGRATION.”

- Brenda Salas Naves, Immigrant Rights Working Group Member,

ALP

No human being is illegal - people may engage in acts that are against the law, but to brand a person as illegal is dehumanizing, and is often used to justify and validate violence against immigrants and their communities. As the Applied Research Center’s “Drop the I Word” campaign pointed out, “referring to people as ‘illegal’ affects attitudes toward immigrants and non-immigrants alike, most often toward people of African, Asian, and Latin American descent. The discriminatory message is not explicit but hidden, or racially coded.” Similarly, the term alien presumes that people who are not citizens of the United States and are not valued members of our communities - or even human. It promotes violence and discrimination, and sends the message that immigrants are sub-human and undeserving.

**Some Preferred Terms**

Immigrant or undocumented immigrant

**Example**

“Undocumented immigrants organize for fair wages”

“Immigrant communities continue the fight for tenants rights”

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**Harmful**

“kids” “teens” “juveniles” - referring to youth/young people

**Example**

“These kids are doing amazing work!”  
“Teens are taking over the village!”

**Why is it Harmful?**

“PEOPLE ASSUME TEENS ARE INCAPABLE OF CERTAIN LEADERSHIP ROLES OR DON'T HAVE THE MENTAL CAPACITY/ SELF CONTROL/UNDERSTANDING TO ARTICULATE OR MAKE GOOD DECISIONS, WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE HISTORICALLY HAVE BEEN THE LEADERS OF A LOT OF OUR MOVEMENTS.

- FIERCE member

Referring to youth as kids or teens is patronizing, and can delegitimize the work and contributions they are making to their communities. Terms like ‘teens’ and ‘kids’ are terms often used to belittle and demean young people’s power. These terms help to perpetuate ageism, which young people then internalize. Also, youth have been targeted and criminalized in our society simply for being within a specific age range. The terms teen or juvenile are also often associated with criminal behavior.

**Some Preferred Terms**

Youth or a Young Person

**Example**

“Youth organize to create safety in the West Village”

“Young People speak out against violence”



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**Harmful**

“Prostitute” “Prostituted person” “street walker” “call girl” “escort” “hooker” “hustler” and “whore.”

**Example**

“Robin has been a prostitute since they were 15 years old”

“Teen Prostitution is an Epidemic!”

**Why it is Harmful?**

“THEY TRY TO CREATE IDENTITIES FOR US, ‘PROSTITUTE’, ‘COMMERCIALLY EXPLOITED CHILDREN’, ‘SEX WORKER’, AND THE LIST GOES ON. BUT THE REALITY IS THAT PEOPLE WHO TRADE SEX IDENTIFY THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN ALL SORTS OF WAYS OR NOT AT ALL. ‘PROSTITUTE’ IS ONE TERM THAT HAS BEEN USED SPECIFICALLY, EVEN IN THE LEGAL CODE, TO DEHUMANIZE US AND COMMIT ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST US. WE NEED TO DESCRIBE THE BEHAVIOR WHEN TALKING ABOUT THE SEX TRADES SO THAT WE CAN ENSURE INDIVIDUALS WHO TRADE SEX HAVE THEIR FULL AGENCY IN DEFINING THEMSELVES AND WHEN WE DO THIS, NAME BEHAVIOR AND NOT CREATE LABELS, WE MAKE SURE THAT ALL OF OUR EXPERIENCES ARE A PART OF THE CONVERSATION.”

-- SAS Youth Leader

Using the term “prostitute” or other terms listed above is dangerous because it is dehumanizing, disempowering, and projects characteristics onto that person, encouraging assumptions that the person is inherently promiscuous, cannot be violated, and will always be engaged in the sex trades. It also does not reflect the realities and complexities of involvement in sex trades for our own survival - trading sex for money is one way that people are involved, but not the only way. This term also does not value our other identities as parents, siblings, neighbors & organizers.

**Some Preferred Terms**

If you are reporting on a particular individual, it is best to ask them and respect how they would prefer to be described. Generally speaking, the terms “people involved in the sex trades,” “people

with experience in the sex trades,” “people who trade sex” are preferred. Involvement in the sex trades is also sometimes referred to as sex work and some people in the sex trades identified as sex workers.

**Example**

“Robin has been involved in the sex trade since they were 15 years old”

“Robin has been trading sex for 5 years now”

“Robin has identified as a sex worker since they were 15 years old”

“Youth in the sex trade; Why we should decriminalize sex work”

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**Harmful**

“criminals” “offenders”

“BY BRANDING SOMEONE AS ‘CRIMINAL’ YOU ARE SENTENCING PEOPLE TO A LIFETIME OF MARGINALIZATION, ASSUMPTIONS AND DENIAL OF THEIR RIGHTS.”

- Chris Bilal, Campaign Staff, Streetwise and Safe (SAS)

**Example**

“ Offenders should be kept off the streets”  
“ He is a criminal”

**Why it is Harmful?**

“Criminal” and “offender” are devaluing labels that follow a human being for the rest of their lives, branding a person for life based solely on an act they may have committed, without reflecting the conditions or context of their actions or the full complexities of their identities and lives as people. It also does not acknowledge their transformation since being convicted of a crime. Labeling someone a “criminal” opens the gateway to employment discrimination, family separation, surveillance, negative interactions with police officers, and racialized, gendered and economic assumptions that delegitimize our contributions to our communities. Additionally using the word “criminal” for youth, homeless, and or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Two Spirit and Gender Non Conforming People of Color are often subject to policing just for existing in public spaces, and

are disproportionately charged with low level offenses as a result.

**Some Preferred Terms**

Person convicted of a crime, people with criminal convictions, person charged with a violation, formerly incarcerated.

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**Harmful**

Brain dead, Lame, Crazy, Schizo, Psycho, Crippled,

“PEOPLE WHO ARE EXPERIMENTED ON AND INSTITUTIONALIZED BASED ON THEIR PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, MENTAL ABILITY IS YET ANOTHER WAY WE ARE POLICED AND CRIMINALIZED.”

-Cara Page, ALP

**Example**

“That strategy for the organizing campaign was so lame.”

“Now that trans woman has no life because the assault left her brain dead”

**Why it is Harmful?**

Using terms that negatively characterize a person’s physical or emotional capacity presumes there is only one type of healthy body. Historically ‘healthy’ has been defined by a body that is white, Christian, male, heterosexual, wealthy, and able bodied while the rest of us are prescribed as producing labor for the ‘dominant healthy body’. Referencing a disability within a negative and demeaning context further perpetuates different mental, physical and emotional capacities as less than human, incapable and worthless to our communities.

Many people who organize, and who do the work on the ground for social justice are folks who also have disabilities or identify as disabled. Many disabilities are not visible, and it is important to be mindful about the language we use to create safety for all of our people.

**Some Preferred Terms**

It is incredibly important to ask folks how they identify! Many folks prefer the terms people with disabilities, differently abled, gifted.

## Intersectionality

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Many people who are the most impacted by systemic and institutional oppressions, such as racism, classism, sexism, transphobia, ablesmetc. are actually impacted by multiple forms of oppression at the same time.

For example, as organizations that work primarily with LGBTSTGNCQ people of color, we can see that folks who are impacted by both racism and transphobia, or racism and homophobia, are far more likely to experience workplace discrimination, discrimination while accessing services from the human resources administration, police brutality and harassment, amongst many other forms of violence ( See the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects Report on violence [HERE](#))

While we might find it easier to focus on one aspect of a person's identity for the sake of ease or accessibility, it actually does a great disservice to our communities to not acknowledge and recognize that every aspect of a person's identity has a deep and real impact on their mobility and access in our societies.

For instance, coverage of the impacts of policing on "communities of color and LGBTSTGNCQ people" presumes that LGBTSTGNCQ people are not part of "communities of color" and that "communities of color" don't include LGBTSTGNCQ people. These communities are not mutually exclusive - for example, many of the Black and Brown men who experience stop and frisk are gay, bisexual or transgender, many transgender women who are routinely profiled for prostitution-related offenses are Black or Latina.

For examples of how to report on the intersections of systemic oppressions, check out the following articles;

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/15/stop-and-frisk-gay-blacks-latinos-transgender-nypd\\_n\\_1599470.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/15/stop-and-frisk-gay-blacks-latinos-transgender-nypd_n_1599470.html)

## Systems vs. Individuals

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Another issue that often comes up is individualizing systemic issues. For instance, when reporting on violence against trans people, it is critical that folks understand that it isn't just individual trans people who are experiencing violence, but that there is a systemic issue of violence targeting trans people specifically because they are perceived as a threat to social norms of gender.

When we individualize, and isolate the incident it can make it easier to victim blame and avoid addressing the systemic issues that lead to culture of violence in the first place.

Here are some articles that are great examples of talking about systems;

<http://alp.org/%E2%80%98we-were-never-meant-survive%E2%80%99-statement-police-violence-hate-violence-and-anti-black-racism>

## Resources/References

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- A guide for interviewing people in the sex trades:

<http://swop-nyc.org/wpress/press/>

- A letter from people who have been convicted of crimes:

<http://centerforleadership.org/current-projects/the-languge-letter-campaign/>

- A campaign to "drop the i-word":

<http://colorlines.com/droptheiword/>

### Organizations!

-The Audre Lorde Project

<http://www.alp.org>

-FIERCE

<http://www.fierceny.org>

-Streetwise and Safe

<http://www.streetwiseandsafe.org/>

-The Sex Workers Project

<http://sexworkersproject.org/>

-Sylvia Rivera Law Project

<http://srlp.org/>

-Trans Media Watch

<http://www.transmediawatch.org/>

-Undocuqueer

<http://www.nysylc.org/how-we-work/>

-Queer Detainee Empowerment Project

<http://qdep.org/>

-Trans Youth Support Network

<http://www.transyouthsupportnetwork.org/>

-Southerners On New ground

<http://southernersonnewground.org/>

### Writers/bloggers/media folks to check out!

-Leaving Evidence; A Blog by Mia Mingus

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/>

-Black Girl Dangerous

<http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/>

-TransGriot- Monica Roberts

<http://transgriot.blogspot.com/>

-Trans Advocate

<http://www.transadvocate.com/>

