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Re: In response to the BCCDC COVID-19 Language Guide

“Language is power, in ways more literal than most people think. When we speak, we exercise the power of language to transform reality. Why don’t more of us realize the connection between language and power?” - Julia Penelope (as quoted in the BCCDC COVID-19 Language Guide)

Julia Penelope was a lesbian feminist whose extensive body of work has concerned itself with foregrounding the lives and experiences of lesbians and in service of the fight for women’s liberation. While we appreciate her quote receiving the prominence that it is surely deserving of, we are aghast that much of the content that follows her words, undermines the very essence of her work.

Language indeed is power and can be a weapon in the hand of the oppressor, or the oppressed. When the oppressed speak openly about the reality of their lives and expose the conditions created by the dominant class, it beckons to others to do the same and movement for change becomes possible. The women’s movement used the powerful tool of consciousness-raising and speak-outs to do just that. The personal and “private” experiences of rape, battery, incest, sexual harassment at the hands of men became political problems that we were all tasked with solving.

Julia Penelope understood power -- who has it and how it is maintained. We, like Julia, know that in a patriarchal society, it is men as a group who hold the lion’s share of it and that the institutions and systems they’ve built uphold this imbalance. We see the exercise of men’s violence, and the threat of it, as one of the ways that interferes with women’s ability to participate and thrive in their communities.

The [BCCDC COVID-19 Language Guide](#) proposes to replace words that describe our present sex-based realities with terms that obscure and misdescribe those realities and the power dynamics at work. We are troubled by this move, given the authority that the BCCDC has, which is of great significance during a pandemic. The following are examples reflective of this objection:

- Preferred term, *gender-based violence*, is defined as “violence specifically based on gender power imbalances.” This definition fails to account for whom the power imbalance favours. We know that the vast majority of violence is perpetrated by men and largely targets women and children. Vancouver Rape Relief alone responds to 1,200 women each year who’ve been raped, sexually assaulted, battered, incested, or sexually harassed by a man. The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability released its inaugural report in 2019 and the findings revealed that a woman or girl is killed every 2.5 days in Canada and where an accused has been identified, 91% are male.
- Preferred term, *sex work*, is explained as, “implies ownership over a person’s own career choice, while “prostitution” and its derivatives carry engrained cultural stigmas.” It is undoubtedly true that the word prostitution carries engrained cultural and unjustified stigmas, however, in simply rebranding terminology without addressing the driving forces of misogyny, racism, colonialism, capitalism, homophobia and transphobia that lead to the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes and violence levelled at those in prostitution, we abandon those

in prostitution to continued violence and harassment. When prostitution becomes merely a career choice, these very same forces that are responsible for narrowing the options available to those who enter prostitution are in effect vanished. The term sex work heavily emphasizes the actions of those being bought in prostitution, mainly women, children, trans people, and gay men, and the men who not only buy access to their bodies, but who often commit acts of horrific violence, are invisibilized.

- Preferred term, *sex assigned at birth*, explained as “by using “assigned” the proper location of issue is placed with institutions and society in terms of misunderstanding and misgendering trans people.” This explanation is a half measure. It is correct in identifying the proper location of issue rests with institutions and society but instructs us to problematize the observation of our sexed bodies instead of criticizing the expected behaviours, roles, restrictions and aspirations placed on us and particular to whether we are born female or male. Women and girls are targeted by men to rape, batter, incest and prostitute simply because we are female. This targeting was not something we’ve opted into, or can opt out of, by way of identity.
- Preferred term, *people with internal genitals*, greatly distorts the complexity and functions of female bodies. The production and access to knowledge about how our anatomy works has been an area of great interest to the feminist movement given that women’s bodies are historically, and presently, understudied and misunderstood. The creation of fundamental texts such as, *Our Bodies Ourselves*, equipped millions of women and girls worldwide and over the course of several decades to better understand experiences particular to the female body such as our breast health, menstrual cycles and sexual pleasure. When words like vagina, vulva, and clitoris are stripped from usage, we’re deprived of acting from a place of self-understanding and expression whether it is in advocating for ourselves in healthcare settings, in expressing sexual pleasure and setting boundaries. Women have had to work hard to overcome the shame associated with the accurate words for our bodies like vagina, vulva, clitoris and by advising not to use these terms, it only increases the stigma we face as women.

The Language Guide makes reference to the importance of stating who does what to whom in the section that critiques referring to vulnerable populations without naming, “what it is that people are vulnerable to, how this vulnerability is produced, or by whom” (p.12). We strongly agree with the necessity of such an approach and urge the BCCDC to apply this principle to the entirety of the language guide.

Laurel McBride

On behalf of the collective of Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter