Think Piece

The relationship between language and safeguarding

This think piece aims to promote greater consideration of the relationship between language, power and safeguarding risks in civil society organisations (CSOs). It builds awareness of possible language issues between staff in CSOs and between staff and the communities with which they work.

Language and power

⇨ Risks of sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) and of other harms and abuses are driven by different forms of abuse of power and inequalities. "The more power a person has, the greater the opportunity to exploit, abuse and harass others. The less power a person has, the more they are likely to be targeted for exploitation, abuse and harassment. The degree of power someone has is closely linked to structural, hierarchical and situational factors" (RSH).

⇨ How an organisation and its staff use language can be one way of demonstrating power. Civil society organisations (CSOs), and organisations in the international development and humanitarian sector more generally, work across many languages, cultures and identities. Use of language is one aspect (of many) that both contributes to and identifies an organisation's culture.

⇨ Language can maintain or reinforce inequalities or exclusion. The use of language, or acceptance of language, can instil stereotypes or assumptions around race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual identity, or other aspects of identity. Practical examples of how language contributes to exclusion or reinforcing inequalities include: making safeguarding policy documents available only in major / international languages and reporting mechanisms not being accessible for people with low literacy levels.

> ### Language and safeguarding
> Thoughtful use of language can contribute to an organisational culture of clear communication and information sharing that empowers staff and others. Inappropriate language can be harmful and a safeguarding incident of itself.

> ### Analyse your organisation's use of language. Consider:
> 1) What the language of your organisation conveys.
>
> 2) What terms staff typically use that are 'accepted'.
>
> 3) How you share knowledge in your organisation and with communities.

✓ Have you translated your policy documents into the languages used throughout your organisation?

✓ Have you introduced appropriate ways to communicate with communities about your commitment to safeguarding?

✓ Do you consult with different groups in communities in an appropriate way, and do you know what all groups want or need to be able to report appropriately?

✓ Does your code of conduct include and explain what is meant by offensive language?

Safeguarding risks related to language

We have identified a range of safeguarding risks related to language. This is not an exhaustive list and many risks (and their causes) overlap. Context, organisational structure and staff behaviour, identity and the degree of power held by the individuals involved will affect the level of risk.

1. The language of your organisation

The language choices made by staff within an organisation can contribute to whether the organisation is creating a safe and inclusive environment.

- Trust is important for effective safeguarding measures. An appropriate use of language can contribute to understanding, confidence and trust between staff and those who interact with the organisation. This promotes the use of safeguarding procedures. "People relate to you better if you speak their language" (RSH staff member, Nigeria).

- The behaviour, beliefs and values of an organisation, often guided by senior staff and founding members, can be reflected in the language, metaphors and tone that they use. Inappropriate or harmful use of language may become familiar and so hard to recognise, particularly for staff who have been in an organisation for a long time. It can be hard to challenge when it is so embedded in the existing organisational culture or power structures. Individuals who find the language inappropriate or harmful may have less power to challenge it, or their concerns may not be heard.

2. The terms used

The use of certain terms may (inadvertently) cause harm, exclude individuals or groups, be insensitive or inappropriate.

- How terms are interpreted will vary according to context and individuals' own perspectives. E.g. the term "target group" may be inappropriate for groups of people who have experienced violence or conflict or the term "LGBTIQ+" may have offensive or no translation options in some languages.

- In some contexts and languages, it is hard to find the right terminology for terms that relate to safeguarding and SEAH. "Safeguarding", "gender", "wellbeing" or "intersectionality" do not always translate easily or may not be commonly known or used in some contexts and languages. Technical terms like these will need to be discussed to avoid mistranslation and misunderstanding.

- Language can be gendered. Women in a context may use different words to men, particularly for sensitive topics related to the female body and sexuality. Also, terms such as "chairman" or word endings in some languages are gendered.

3. How your organisation shares knowledge

The language people speak determines their access to knowledge.

- Decisions on which language(s) to work in, what to translate or not, and whether or not to have simultaneous interpretations in meetings may maintain existing power structures.

- Assumptions are made about the extent to which a dominant language is understood. Making generalisations about who understands what language can risk sharing the information with the best educated (or specific ethnic group) in a country rather than with a broader audience.

- Some cultures may have more of a focus on the spoken rather than the written word and many languages have no written form. Written safeguarding policies, awareness raising materials or a code of conduct may not be appropriate, understood or respected and may exclude some people.

- Difficulties may arise when staff work with an interpreter to communicate with colleagues or community members. Working with an interpreter who has a similar background to the person

being communicated with and prior knowledge of the language and content being communicated can build trust and allow for more accurate translations.

- A person's dialect or accent can affect trust and may be associated with power.

- Inaccessible technical language may exclude certain staff members or others from understanding and engaging, e.g. in organisational policies or meetings.

Mitigating the safeguarding risks related to language

1. Use language to create safer organisational environments

- Build staff understanding

Build understanding of the connection between language and power amongst all staff, including leadership and trustees. Some staff will already have this knowledge and understanding and, where they are comfortable, the wider organisation can learn from their experiences. Support staff to reflect on their power and to consider the terms they use, how they express themselves and if their communication methods are appropriate.

- Use language that encourages feedback

Promote the use of language that invites feedback and removes judgement, e.g. "I don't know", "I need help", "what can I do better next time", "I take responsibility for that", "I'm here for you". (Detailed in [CHS Conference Session on Culture and behaviour change in aid organisations](#)).

2. Use terms which are more appropriate

- Understand terms in the language of choice

In your community engagement, e.g. when setting up a community-based reporting mechanism and building awareness about safeguarding, ask people what language(s) they prefer. In the preferred language(s), break down safeguarding-related terms and definitions, e.g. what is exploitation in your context? As part of this process, test assumptions on whether a term is appropriate or not.

- Learn and unlearn

Create safe spaces in training or discussions for staff and members of communities to discuss terminology on safeguarding in their primary language(s). This can help test the validity of a concept in a given cultural context and can also reveal useful gaps between terms and their intended meaning, e.g. has "gender" become equated with "things about women"? Or does the term rape only refer to an act perpetrated on a woman?

> **Language is one way that power is demonstrated in CSOs**
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> Including a diverse range of voices in the formulation of ways of working, policies, concepts and programmes can help:
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> 1) Ensure that the organisation and its work is better informed by language.
>
> 2) Move away from relying on "translations" once a product is developed and consider how a language is used (e.g. appropriate terms and content) as you are developing the product.

> **Remember!** Communities, cultures and languages evolve over time.

3. Share knowledge through different communication methods

- Communicate in a way that is relevant to your audience

Share proverbs, a prayer (if appropriate), a poem or something relevant to bring colleagues together, reinforce a point or start / end a meeting.

- Use data about language

Challenge your assumptions about who understands what language. Use data that exists to find information on what languages are spoken in your target areas.

- Collect data about language

Add some basic language questions into all your programme assessments and surveys e.g. "What is the main language you use at home?". More questions to ask about preferred written languages and format can be found here.

- Lead by example

All your internal and external communication materials should be written as simply and clearly as possible. Information on plain language writing can be found here. Test whether materials can be readily understood by asking people to read a short text and explain the points to you in their own words. Allocate resources for interpreting and translation.

- Acknowledge non-written languages

Include sign language within your scope of languages. Make sure you consider the needs of those using non-written languages if they exist in your community.

- Respect the importance of communication method

Understand the communication preferences and style where you are working and plan based on local preferences. This may involve challenging existing assumptions about how knowledge is shared, e.g. written safeguarding policies may not be the most appropriate in all contexts.

> "Expertise" looks different in different places.
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> Language is not just about sharing jargon and concepts with the people we work with.
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> Language should reflect and recognise the expertise and experience within communities.
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> Consider:
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> - What is already in place?
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> - What can we learn?
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> - How do we ensure this informs our concepts and plans?

> As you explore the relationship between safeguarding and language in your organisation and work to establish or strengthen actions to mitigate the risks, you may want to consider:
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> How does this issue affect your organisation? What are the biggest risks? What solutions have you tried? What worked?