

SIX TIPS FOR HUMANITARIANS WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS ON SENSITIVE TOPICS

Translators without Borders, in collaboration with Oxfam, has identified six key tips for humanitarian workers to address the sociolinguistic barriers that often occur when working with interpreters on sensitive topics, and to support the mental health of interpreters.

What do we mean by “sensitive topics”? These might be culturally sensitive or taboo issues relating to violence, abuse, exploitation, as well as gender equality, reproductive health, and sexual norms and behaviors. Many sensitive topics are relevant to protection work. However, they also relate to other areas such as health, psychosocial support, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH). For instance, WaSH and health programmes may need to discuss menstruation, and risks of sexual violence can be an issue for both protection and shelter programs. Interpreters and programme teams may have to address similar sensitivities in public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.



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OUR EXPERIENCE SUGGESTS THAT...

1 Humanitarian programmes rarely include adequate budget for professional interpreters and often rely on their own staff or on community members as informal interpreters. This raises concerns about both quality and confidentiality.

2 In some languages, words for sensitive issues might not exist or if they do, they might carry stigma or not be commonly known by community members.

This might also include humanitarian and technical terms and concepts in English that are hard to translate clearly into other languages. Terms like “case” (rather than “patient” or “sick person”) might be misinterpreted or perceived as lacking empathy. If interpreters use words that aren’t neutral or understood, this may affect how community members engage or act on advice. For instance, a woman who has been sexually assaulted might not understand the urgency of accessing post-exposure prophylaxis.

SO, YOU CAN TRY TO...

- Assess the need for interpreting at the start and resource it properly.
- Pay attention to specific age, gender, disability and other diversity characteristics of the affected people you are working with.
- Conduct a safe programming risk analysis to avoid unintentional harm to both affected people and interpreters or their families.
- Avoid relying on family members to communicate with vulnerable people where possible and use trained interpreters instead.
- Recruit and train interpreters based on who you want to talk with, about what, and in which places/contexts.
- Be clear about what you expect of interpreters, including understanding ‘informed consent’. Interpreters should say everything that you say to the person or people you are speaking with and vice versa, as far as they are able to. They should not add their own personal opinions leave anything out, have their own conversations with people or place any pressure on people to speak to you.

- Discuss suitable and respectful translations of key words and concepts in local languages with interpreters before any kind of interaction with community members. This gives interpreters more confidence in their work and assures you that community members are likely to share your understanding of key words.
- Avoid using jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms that assume a level of knowledge around a specific topic, except where relevant and appropriate.
- Provide interpreters with sector-specific inductions, for instance on basic protection issues related to the context, to help them prepare effectively. Give them the opportunity to ask you questions about any technical terms and concepts, without feeling rushed.
- Remember that language has power; good intentions combined with poor word choices can do more harm than good.



Example: In Hausa, one of the more than 30 mother tongues spoken by conflict-displaced people in northeast Nigeria, the common word for “mental health” translates as “crazy.” A mental health clinic that apparently had not conducted any language research had a sign advertising itself as “services for crazy people.” This poor translation carries a heavy stigma, possibly keeping people away from services from which they could benefit.

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3 Communities often use indirect language or euphemisms to talk about sensitive topics. This can lead to misunderstandings or misreporting of affected people's experiences and concerns.

At the same time, indirect language and euphemisms can ease the difficulty of talking about topics that cannot be discussed publicly or where others can hear without causing embarrassment or offense. They can add an additional layer of privacy, especially in contexts like refugee camps where private space is limited.



Example: In the Democratic Republic of Congo, words relating to some symptoms of Ebola and to reproductive organs, sex, and bodily fluids cause embarrassment when used in public. Talking about diarrhea or the sexual transmission of Ebola, especially in a situation where others can overhear, is considered disrespectful. As a woman in Beni said, "There are terms we do not say in public, outside, where anyone can hear. You see, these health workers who came here for Ebola don't have any taboos in their culture. They'll say anything in public and it stigmatizes the patient."

SO, YOU CAN TRY TO...

- Train interpreters to document indirect language and euphemisms and clarify what they mean. This builds understanding of local language used to discuss sensitive issues and improves how we address those issues.
- Consider involving community members with whom you have developed a relationship of trust to further discuss how to translate specific words or concepts. Build a glossary of these translations and add new words to it as needed and share it with others so they can also benefit from your work.
- Consult community members and interpreters about a culturally appropriate location for talking about sensitive topics in a respectful way.

4 Language can be gendered. Women in a community might use different words than men, particularly for sensitive topics related to the female body and sexuality.

Women might also be reluctant to discuss these topics openly with a man or someone from a different ethnic group. Similar considerations are relevant when discussing sensitive topics with children and people with disabilities, especially disabilities affecting communication.

- Train interpreters on how to discuss sensitive issues according to the gender, age, and disability of the person they are going to interact with.
- Increase the pool of trained female and sign language interpreters. In situations or languages where such interpreters are hard to find, an interagency pool of interpreters could be a solution.



Example: In the refugee camps in Bangladesh, Rohingya women have responded to the many sociocultural constraints and segregation they face by developing a sociolect, or a social dialect of their own. Certain words or euphemisms within this sociolect are not easily understood by Rohingya men. For instance, haiz is an academic word for menstruation that is borrowed from Arabic. However, many young women do not like to say this word. They prefer to use the euphemism, gusol, which literally means "to shower."

OUR EXPERIENCE SUGGESTS THAT...

5 Working with an interpreter from the same background as the targeted community can build trust and allow for more accurate translations, but interpreters may also present a risk to community members if not properly selected and trained.

SO, YOU CAN TRY TO...

- When selecting interpreters carry out the same checks and put in place the same safeguards as you would with other staff, consultants or contractors.
- Be prepared to provide them with training and resources about the code of conduct, safeguarding procedures, confidentiality, data protection, and psychological first aid, in a language they are comfortable with.
- Interpreting only works well if everyone involved trusts the process.
- Ensure interpreters are available to support interactions with anyone who needs it, including older people and people with disabilities. Consider discussing inclusion issues with them beforehand, such as how best to include people with hearing or visual impairments.
- Actively seek feedback and act upon it and continue to support interpreters after initial training.



Example: During the 2015 refugee crisis in Greece, Baluchi refugees reported not trusting Pakistani interpreters because of political tensions between Baluchis and the Pakistani state. The refugees feared that disclosing their reasons for fleeing to the interpreters would have repercussions for their families back home. This may have contributed to them not receiving asylum status in the first round of applications.

6 Interpreters often work under pressure and deal with distressing content when interpreting. Anxiety, depression, stress, burn-out, and vicarious trauma are all risks for interpreters.

These might be especially relevant when interpreters are members of an affected community. The setting in which interactions with community members take place can cause additional distress for interpreters.

- Give interpreters access to mental health support resources, regardless of whether they work in a formal or informal role.
- Provide interpreters with professional development opportunities, including training on self-care, and recognize and reward their contribution.
- Ask interpreters about what challenges may occur during an interaction with affected people, and how to mitigate them ahead of time. This includes considering the need to maintain a physical distance between those involved, providing them with personal protective equipment, or arranging for remote interpretation using mobile technology due to safety or public health concerns.
- Include interpreters in debriefings and seek their feedback on their experience and the support they require.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Translators without Borders, [Field guide to humanitarian interpreting and cultural mediation](#)

Translators without Borders, [Glossaries](#)

Highlander Research and Education Center, [What Did They Say? Interpreting for Social Justice - An Introductory Curriculum](#)

Red T, [Conflict Zone Field Guide for Civilian Translators/Interpreters and Users of Their Services](#)

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Would you like this tip sheet to be available in another language? Get in touch!

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