Why using “sex change” is problematic and recommendations

Lately there has been a rise in stories regarding transgender people in the news. When reporting stories involving transgender people we advise avoiding use of the term "sex change", either to describe a transgender person or the process of gender transition.

For example, instead of "sex change soldier", we recommend "trans (or transgender) soldier". Similarly, instead of "soldier who had a sex change", say "soldier who has come out as trans/is trans/is transgender". This is more accurate and less offensive.

Why is it problematic?

The term “sex change” has a long history of aggressive tabloid use to "out" and ridicule trans people. Trans people do not use "sex change" when referring to themselves and, just as in the case of other pejorative terms used to describe minorities, find it discriminatory when referred to in this way by others.

Such pejorative usage is in direct contradiction of the IPSO Editor’s Code of Practice: “The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual’s ... gender identity”.

In a world where equal marriage and gender non-conformity are widely respected and accepted by the public, it feels intolerant and unaccepting.

Recommendations

In almost all cases "transgender person" or "trans person" are the only terms necessary in common parlance. They are the most widely acceptable among the trans community and universally understood in UK society today; analogous to “gay” or “lesbian”.

Important to remember

As it says in our online friendly note of tips on reporting stories regarding trans people: If your story boils down to “Jane is transgender...” consider the hundreds of thousands of gender non-conforming people in Britain today; doctors, engineers, lawyers, artists, teachers, politicians, musicians, managers, soldiers... and so on. Is your story really newsworthy?

For more resources and style guides for reporting stories please visit http://www.allabouttrans.org.uk/about/resources/

Media Standards Trust have a list of news organisations from across the UK, if you want to complain or get in touch.