Gender Identity and Pronouns:
A Comprehensive Guide

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Understanding Gender, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression

Why learn about Gender, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression?

Learning about gender and gender identity can help people understand themselves and others. People who are transgender, gender non-conforming, gender-diverse, or otherwise non-cisgender routinely face discrimination, harassment, and violence because their gender identity and/or expression does not match the societal expectations of their gender assigned at birth. Reflecting on our own gender and societal rules around gender helps us to be open and curious about concepts that can create a society that is more inclusive for all, not rooted in harsh gender roles.

 Here are 10 ways that learning about gender and gender identity can have a positive impact:

1. **Respect and Inclusivity**: Understanding gender helps foster respect for individuals' identities, allowing us to use the correct pronouns and language. It promotes inclusivity by acknowledging that not everyone fits within traditional or binary gender categories.

2. **Empathy and Support**: Learning about gender identity can help us empathize with people whose experiences may be different from our own.

Understanding the challenges faced by those with non-binary, transgender, gender-diverse, gender-nonconforming, and non-cis identities can lead to stronger support networks.

3. **Breaking Stereotypes**: Knowledge of gender and gender identity helps challenge outdated and limiting stereotypes, encouraging a more open-minded society where individuals are free to express themselves authentically, regardless of gender.

4. **Mental and Emotional Well-being**: For people with diverse gender identities, feeling understood and respected can have a significant impact on mental and emotional health. Educating ourselves contributes to reducing stigma and creating environments where everyone feels safe and accepted.

5. **Social Justice and Supporting Equality**: A better understanding of gender is crucial to advocating for equal rights and protections for people of all genders. This awareness can support efforts to stop discrimination, improve policies, and ensure that everyone has access to the same opportunities and resources.

6. **Personal Growth**: Learning about gender identity encourages critical thinking, self-reflection, and growth. It opens the door to questioning societal norms and understanding how those norms shape our personal and collective experiences. Exploring gender broadens your perspective and

challenges stereotypes or biases you may not realize you hold. This can lead to greater self-awareness and personal growth.

7. **Enhances Communication:** When you understand gender identity and expression, you can engage in more meaningful and respectful conversations. Using appropriate pronouns and language demonstrates consideration and care.

8. **Improves Relationships:** Understanding gender helps build stronger relationships, whether with friends, family, or colleagues. It shows that you value and accept people for who they are.

9. **Empowers Allyship**: Knowledge about gender and gender identity equips you to support marginalized groups, such as transgender and nonbinary individuals, in navigating challenges and advocating for their rights

10. **Reflects Contemporary Realities:** Society is becoming increasingly aware of and open to diverse gender identities. Staying informed about these topics ensures you are engaged in current social conversations and prepared to adapt to evolving cultural norms.

It is also important to note that "Under the Ontario Human Rights Code (the Code) people are protected from discrimination and harassment because of gender identity and gender expression in employment, housing, facilities and services, contracts, and membership in unions, trade or professional associations." (Ontario

Human Rights Commission, 2014). Having this knowledge will help to ensure you are following the Ontario Human Rights Code.

What is Gender, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression?

Gender, gender identity, and gender expression are vital aspects of human diversity, offering endless ways for people to live authentically and express themselves. Gender, gender identity, and gender expression are distinct but interconnected concepts. Understanding the nuanced differences between these terms is essential for celebrating queer identities and dismantling systems of oppression rooted in gender norms. Acknowledging that gender is fluid and multifaceted allows us to affirm and respect everyone's lived realities. When we embrace this diversity, we help create spaces where all individuals, especially those in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, can thrive unapologetically as their true selves

Language and Definitions Surrounding Gender, Gender Identity and Gender Expression

Gender refers to the social, cultural, and psychological expectations and stereotypes about behaviours, actions and roles associated by society with being a "man" or "woman". It encompasses expectations, roles, and behaviors that societies often assign based on perceived biological sex. Gender roles and norms vary widely across cultures and time periods. Gender does not equal sex assigned at birth.

Sex (Sex Assigned at Birth) The classification of people as male, female or intersex. Sex is usually assigned at birth and is based on an assessment of a

person's reproductive systems, hormones, chromosomes and other physical characteristics such as reproductive anatomy. However, this classification is not as straightforward as it is often portrayed. Intersex individuals, who are born with variations in sex characteristics that do not fit typical definitions of male or female, highlight the natural diversity beyond binary categories. The term "assigned at birth" emphasizes that this classification is made by medical professionals based on external anatomy, which may or may not align with an individual's lived experience of their gender.

Gender identity is an individual's internal and individual sense of their own gender. It is an internal, personal experience of being male, female, both, neither, or somewhere along the gender spectrum. A person may or may not identify their gender with their sex assigned at birth. Gender identity is different and not related to sexual orientation. Gender identity is not visible unless shared by the person, it is diverse and can include many identities.

Gender Expression is how a person externally communicates, publicly expresses or presents their gender to others. This can include behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, and other physical appearances or actions. A person's chosen name and pronoun are also common ways of expressing their gender. It may or may not align with societal expectations for someone's perceived gender or sex. All people regardless of their gender identity have a gender expression.

Genderqueer/Gender Non-Conforming/Gender Fluid are terms that describe identities and expressions that challenge or exist outside traditional gender

norms. These identities defy the binary concept of "male" and "female," emphasizing the vast spectrum of gender diversity.

Non-Binary is a gender identity that exists outside the traditional binary framework of "male" and "female." Non-binary people may identify as a blend of both genders, as neither, or as a unique identity entirely independent of traditional categories. It is an expansive and inclusive term that honors the diversity of ways people experience and define their gender.

Trans/Transgender refers to individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. It is an umbrella term that describes people with diverse gender identities and gender expressions that do not conform to stereotypical societal gender norms. Being trans is not defined by medical interventions, physical appearance, or adherence to societal expectations—it's about living authentically in one's true gender.

Intersex is a term used to describe a person born with reproductive systems, chromosomes and/or hormones that are not easily characterized as male or female. Historically, intersex individuals have often been assigned male or female at birth through medical interventions or societal pressures, disregarding their unique physical traits and autonomy, which can lead to physical harm, emotional distress, and the erasure of their identities.

Cis/Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, someone assigned female at birth who identifies as a woman, or someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a man, would be considered cisgender. While cisgender people are not typically subject

to the same societal challenges and discrimination that transgender people face, understanding the term helps contextualize the experiences of gender identity across a spectrum.

Two-Spirit is an Indigenous term used by some First Nations communities to describe a person embodying both masculine and feminine spirits, or a unique gender role within their culture. Rooted in tradition, it is not just about gender or sexuality but also spiritual and cultural identity, often tied to specific community roles, such as healers, mediators, or knowledge keepers. Two-Spirit is distinct from western LGBTQIA+ concepts, as it reflects Indigenous worldviews that see gender as fluid and sacred. Importantly, it is a term of reclamation and resistance, honouring pre-colonial understandings of gender and resisting erasure caused by colonization. Only Indigenous people can identify as Two-Spirit, as it is deeply tied to Indigenous culture and community.

Pronouns

Why learn about Pronouns?

Assuming someone's gender can cause emotional harm, leading to feelings of invalidation and exclusion. It can reinforce stereotypes and make individuals feel unseen or misunderstood. On the other hand, using someone's correct pronouns shows respect, recognition, and care for their identity. This small but meaningful action can foster a sense of belonging, reduce stigma, and promote mental well-being, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone.

What are Pronouns?

Pronouns are words that can replace nouns.

Person pronouns

Person pronouns refer to the different sets of pronouns used to represent individuals or groups in language. They are typically categorized based on the **person** being referred to: the speaker, the person being spoken to, or the person being spoken about. Here's an overview of person pronouns:

1. **First Person Pronouns** – Used by the speaker to refer to themselves.
   - **Examples**: I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours
2. **Second Person Pronouns** – Used to address the person or people being spoken to.
   - **Examples**: you, your, yours
3. **Third Person Pronouns** – Used to refer to a person other than themself or the person they are speaking to.
   - **Examples**: he, him, his, she, her, hers, they, them, theirs, themselves, themself

Person pronouns help specify who is being referred to, and using the correct pronouns shows respect for an individual's identity.
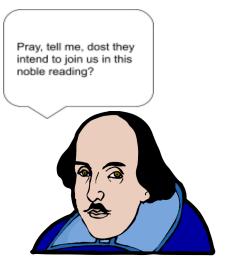
Neopronouns

A Neopronoun can be a word created to serve as a pronoun without expressing gender. They are a category of new or "non-traditional" pronouns used by

individuals to express their gender identity in a way that feels more authentic or fitting for them.

Using "They" is Grammatically Correct

The use of "they" as a singular pronoun has a long history in the English language and is grammatically correct. Historically, "they" has been used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun to refer to an individual whose gender is unknown or unspecified. This usage dates back to the 14th century and has been widely accepted by prominent writers, including Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens (Bennet, 2015). The singular "they" is now widely recognized by linguists and grammarians as a legitimate and practical way to refer to individuals who do not identify with binary gender labels (e.g., male or female).

Pray, tell me, dost they intend to join us in this noble reading?

In recent years, the use of "they" as a pronoun for non-binary individuals, those who do not identify strictly as male or female, has gained increasing prominence. This practice aligns with evolving understandings of gender and allows individuals to express their identities more authentically. Major style guides, including the Chicago Manual of Style and the Associated Press, have endorsed the singular "they" in their official guidelines (Merriam-Webster, 2020; Chicago Manual of Style, 2017). Studies have shown that using correct pronouns, including the singular "they," fosters inclusivity and respect for people's gender identities, contributing to a more accepting and understanding society (Gervais, 2021).

What to do if You're not Sure

If you don't know someone's pronouns and haven't had the chance to ask, you can avoid making assumptions by using gender-neutral language like "they" or by referring to the person by their name instead of using a pronoun.

For example:

- "I spoke with Taylor. They mentioned they would come by later."
- "I saw Pat at the event. Pat looked happy to be there."

This shows consideration and avoids making incorrect assumptions.

Using Pronouns in Conversation

Once you know someone's pronouns, use them consistently. Here are examples for different pronouns:

- He/Him: "John said he would arrive at 3 p.m. I spoke to him yesterday."
- She/Her: "Sadia likes to read. I gave her a book for her birthday."
- They/Them: "Jordan is coming to the event. I spoke to them earlier, and they said they'll bring the drinks."
- Ze/Zir: "Tyrell is a great artist. I love zir work!"

Pronouns in Professional and Social Settings

In some environments, such as workplaces or educational settings, it's becoming more common for people to share their pronouns in introductions. For example:

- In a Zoom meeting: "Hi, I'm Sam, and my pronouns are they/them."
- On an email signature: "Alex Johnson (they/them)"
- You can also add your pronouns to ID badges, name tags, and business cards.
- In a group setting make space for pronouns in introductions. If you are facilitating or leading the conversation make sure to add yours to let others know it is a safe space to do so. Example: "My name is Imani, my pronouns are she/they."

If pronouns are not explicitly shared, you can still ask, and you can always use gender-neutral language (e.g., "they") if you're unsure.

Using Singular They/Them Pronouns

They/them pronouns for an individual are used the same way that he/him and she/her are. They/Them pronouns can be used when referring to a person whose gender identity is non-binary, unknown, or when you want to avoid assuming someone's gender.

Here are some examples:

- "They are coming to the party later."

- "They said they would be here by 7 p.m."

- "I spoke to them yesterday."

- "Can you give the book to them?"

- "That book is theirs."

- "Is this pen theirs?"

- "They did it themselves."

- "I saw them fix it themselves."

Using Multiple Pronouns Sets

Some people may feel connected to more than one set of pronouns, using them interchangeably based on context, comfort, or personal preference. For example, someone might use **she/they**, allowing others to refer to them with either pronoun set, like "She is on her way" or "They are excited about their new project." Both sets affirm their identity.

Pronouns are Fluid

Fluid pronouns refer to the fact that pronouns can change over time or depending on how a person feels or identifies in a given moment. For instance, someone might use **he/him** one day, **they/them** another, and perhaps another set like **xe/xem** later. Pronoun fluidity recognizes that identity isn't static for everyone and that language can adapt to affirm and respect how individuals navigate their sense of self.

To support this:

- Use the pronouns someone shares with you at any given time without questioning or judgment.
- If you're unsure about current pronouns, politely ask: "What pronouns are you using today?"
- Respect changes and practice flexibility, understanding that this fluidity is an authentic part of many people's lives.

Making Mistakes

It's natural to make mistakes when learning about pronouns, especially if you're not used to using them. If you use the wrong pronouns:

1. **Apologize briefly**: "I'm sorry, I meant they."
2. **Correct yourself**: "Jordan said they would arrive at 3 p.m."
3. **Move on**: Don't dwell on the mistake. Acknowledge it and continue the conversation.

Don't dwell on your mistake or make a big deal of it, this leads to the person who has been misgendered having to then make you feel better and puts the mental and emotional load on them.

If you are making the same mistake often, you may need to do some internal reflection on the mental image you have of this person. Make sure you are seeing the person for who they are and not who you think they are.

Make time for practice. A great way to learn a new pattern of behaviour is practice, practice, practice!

Over time, using the correct pronouns will become second nature.

Honorifics

Honorifics are titles or forms of address used to show respect or politeness. They can indicate social status, profession, or formality in conversation. In North America, honorifics are commonly used in professional or formal settings to convey respect (Holmes, 2013). You may use or see honorifics at the beginning of letters, emails, Identification badges, or other formal occasions.

Some common Honorifics are Mr., Mrs., Ms., and Dr.

Gender-neutral honorifics are titles or forms of address that do not indicate the gender of the person being referred to. These honorifics are used to be inclusive and respectful of people who do not identify with traditional gender categories or wish to avoid gendered language (Baker, 2019).

An example of a gender neutral honorific is: Mx. (pronounced 'mix')

When using honorifics, consider whether they are necessary in the circumstances. An alternative way to address someone formally is to use their full name (University of Toronto, n.d.).

Using Pronouns - 10 Tips

1. Don't Assume Someone's Pronouns

If you are unsure about someone's pronouns, the best approach is to ask respectfully. You can do this in a private conversation or as part of a group introduction. Here are some ways to ask:

- "Can I ask which pronouns you use?"

- "How do you like to be referred to?"

It's helpful to introduce your own pronouns first, as it makes the conversation more natural. For example:

- "Hi, I'm Alex, and I use they/them pronouns. What about you?"

2. Normalize! Include Your Pronouns in Introductions

Normalize pronouns by including yours when you introduce yourself. "Hi, I'm Jamie, I use She/They pronouns." This makes it easier for others to share theirs.

You can also include your pronouns in email signatures, business cards, ID or name tags and badges, place cards etc.

3. Use Gender Neutral Language in Groups or Before You Know Someone's Pronouns

If you don't know someone's pronouns, use neutral terms like "they/them" or "this person" until you know their pronouns. For example: "Someone left their bag behind - does anyone know who it belongs to?"

When referring to a group of people avoid terms like "ladies and gentleman" or "boys and girls" instead use terms such as folks, everyone, friends, colleagues, associates, distinguished guests. If it is a group of professionals you can use terms that would be related to their profession such as: Educators, Teachers, Medical Staff, Doctors, etc.

This is also important when talking to children. If you are speaking to a group of children you can use terms such as: my group, folks, kids, grade ones, kindergarteners, etc.

Another way to not assume gender or sexual orientation, instead of using boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife, use terms such as spouse or partner. If the person then brings up the term used in their partnership, switch to what they are using then.

For Example:

"Hey Alex, I heard your spouse wasn't feeling well. I hope they feel better today."

"Thanks Bilal, my wife is feeling much better but still has a headache. Any suggestions to help?"

"I get bad headaches too, let your wife know I find sitting in the dark or very low lighting helpful."

4. Use Gender Affirming Language.

Once you know someone's pronouns be sure to use Gender Affirming Language

Gender-affirming language is a way of communicating that acknowledges and supports a person's gender identity. It can be written, oral, or visual.

This means use gender neutral language until someone's pronouns or how they like to be referred to has been identified to you. Once they have told you, use the language they have said.

For Example:

Before Pronouns Are Shared:
You're discussing a new colleague who hasn't shared their pronouns yet.
"I met the new team member today. They seem really excited to get started, and their ideas for the project were great!"

After Pronouns Are Shared:
Later, the colleague introduces themselves: "Hi, I'm Sam, and I use he/him pronouns."
You adjust your language: "It's great to meet you, Sam! He had some fantastic ideas for the project earlier—our team is lucky to have him on board."

5. Ask Everyone for Pronouns (Don't just ask people whose gender expression or gendered appearance is unexpected to you for their pronouns)

Only asking people with nontraditional gender expressions for their pronouns reinforces harmful stereotypes about how gender "should" look and can make them feel singled out or othered. It also risks misgendering those whose appearance seems to align with societal expectations but whose pronouns may differ. Assuming pronouns based on appearance ignores the diversity of identities

and places an unfair burden on marginalized individuals. Instead, normalize asking everyone for their pronouns, share your own first, and use neutral language until clarified to foster inclusivity and respect.

6. Apologize and Correct!

Don't dwell on your mistake or make a big deal of it; this often leads to the person being misgendered needing to make you feel better.

If you use the wrong pronoun, correct yourself briefly and move on: "He—sorry, they—said they'll be here at 5." Avoid over-apologizing.

If you find yourself making mistakes often, you may also need to do some internal reflection about the mental image you have of this person. See the person for who they are, and not who you think they are. (Egale Canada, 2024).

7. Practice!

Familiarize yourself with using different pronouns by practicing in private. Try sentences like, "Ze is going to the store," or "I spoke to them yesterday."

Want to Practice Pronouns?
Check out this online tool:

https://www.minus18.org.au/pronouns/

8. Update Systems and Forms

Advocate for inclusive practices in your community or workplace, such as adding spaces for pronouns on name tags, email signatures, and forms

9. Correct Others with Kindness

If you notice someone misusing another's pronouns, gently correct them, especially if the person being misgendered is not present: "Actually, Alex uses they/them pronouns."

10. Educate! (Yourself and Others)

Learn about pronouns and their significance, and share this knowledge with others. This reduces the burden on trans and nonbinary people to explain their identities. Understand that pronoun use is deeply personal and may evolve over time. Respect changes and adapt as needed without judgment.

A List of Pronouns

(Please note this is not an exhaustive list)

They/Them - Singular pronouns. Used to refer to a person without specifying their gender. Commonly used as a gender-neutral pronoun for individuals who are non-binary or prefer not to be identified by gendered pronouns.

He/Him - Singular pronouns. Used to refer to a person who identifies as male. Commonly used to indicate a person's gender as male or masculine.

She/Her - Singular pronouns. Used to refer to a person who identifies as female. Commonly used to indicate a person's gender as female or feminine.

He/They - Singular pronouns. Used to refer to a person who may identify as male or masculine but also prefers the use of gender-neutral pronouns. This combination often reflects a fluid or non-binary gender identity.

She/They - Singular pronouns. Used to refer to a person who may identify as female or feminine but also prefers the use of gender-neutral pronouns. This combination often reflects a fluid or non-binary gender identity.

They/He -Singular pronouns. Used to refer to a person who prefers both gender-neutral "they" pronouns and masculine "he" pronouns. This combination often reflects a gender identity that is fluid or non-binary.

They/She - Singular Pronouns. Used to refer to a person who prefers both gender-neutral "they" pronouns and feminine "she" pronouns. This combination often reflects a gender identity that is fluid or non-binary.

Ki/Kin - Ki and Kin are pronouns that can be used to refer to living beings on Earth, including plants, animals, and humans. Ki/Kin originated from the grammar of animacy and the Anishinaabe word Bemaadiziiaaki, which means, "being of the living Earth." The terms being recognized as pronouns was introduced by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Xe/Xyr/Xem - (Pronounced: Zee/Zeer/Zem), Neopronouns. Used as gender-neutral alternatives to "he" and "she." "Xe" is used as the subject, "xyr" as the possessive, and "xem" as the object. These pronouns are often used by individuals who prefer not to be identified by traditional gendered pronouns. The 'x' in some ways replaces the 'h' or 's', sidestepping traditional gender terms.

Ze/Zir/Zem - (Pronounced: Zee, Zeer, Zem), Neopronouns. Used as gender-neutral alternatives to "he" and "she." "Ze" is used as the subject, "zir" as the possessive, and "zem" as the object. These pronouns are often used by individuals who prefer not to be identified by traditional gendered pronouns.

Ey/Em/Eir - (Pronounced: ay, em, air), Neopronouns. Pronounced ay/em/airs/. Ey/Em/Eir - Pronouns. Used as gender-neutral alternatives to "he" and "she." "Ey" is used as the subject, "eir" as the possessive, and "em" as the object. These

pronouns are often chosen by individuals who prefer not to use traditional gendered pronouns. Christine M. Elverson of Illinois created ey/em/eir in 1975 as replacements for she/he, him/her, and his/hers. She created them by removing the "th" from they, them, and their.

Important! Remember some individuals use a mix of pronouns or no pronouns at all. If you are unsure it is better to respectfully ask .

Looking for More Resources?

We recommend:

1. **Government of Canada, Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2SLGBTQI+**

   https://www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/free-to-be-me.html

2. **University of Toronto, Sexual & Gender Diversity Office**

   https://sgdo.utoronto.ca/resources/

3. **Rainbow Health Ontario https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/**

4. **Ontario Human Rights Commission, Questions and Answers about Gender Identity and Pronouns**

   https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/questions-and-answers-about-gender-identity-and-pronouns

5. **Egale Canada, Pronoun Usage Guide**

   https://egale.ca/awareness/pronoun-usage-guide/

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