

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER PRONOUNS & THEIR USE IN WORKPLACE COMMUNICATIONS

Developed by the NIH Sexual & Gender Minority Research Office and the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

TOPIC

This document provides an overview of gender pronouns, legal rights protecting sexual and gender minority (SGM) employees, guidance on the appropriate use of pronouns within the workplace, and other useful information. The overarching goal of this resource is to facilitate inclusive, affirming, and welcoming workplace environments for all SGMs.

GENDER PRONOUNS & THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Gender pronouns are a way for individuals to identify themselves outside of using their name. Pronouns are important not only because they are used for everyday communication, but also because they are used to convey and affirm gender identity, especially for SGM communities. This is especially true for those whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth (e.g., transgender individuals) or whose gender identity or expression does not fall within binary constructs of gender (e.g., genderqueer or gender nonbinary individuals). In some cases, these individuals may use gender-neutral or gender-inclusive pronouns, such as “they,” “them,” and many others (see below for additional examples). Using a person’s correct pronouns provides gender affirmation, signals mutual respect, and creates a more welcoming and tolerant environment. Being misgendered (i.e., being referred to with incorrect pronouns) can be an extremely hurtful and invalidating experience. Intentional refusal to use someone’s correct pronouns is equivalent to harassment and a violation of one’s civil rights.

LEGAL RIGHTS

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 expressly prohibits workplace discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. In 2020, The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Title VII’s prohibition against sex discrimination includes discrimination based on an employee’s gender identity or sexual orientation. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s technical assistance publication [Protections Against Employment Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity](#) considers the use of pronouns or names that are inconsistent with an individual’s gender identity as unlawful harassment. EEOC guidance states, “intentionally and repeatedly using the wrong name and pronouns to refer to a transgender employee could contribute to an unlawful hostile work environment” and is a violation of Title VII.

USING PRONOUNS IN THE WORKPLACE

Encouraging the disclosure and use of gender pronouns can create inclusive and welcoming work environments for SGM employees and their allies. One of the simplest ways to promote the appropriate and correct use of pronouns is by being open about your own in everyday communications (introductions, PPT slides, etc.). Disclosing personal pronouns at the start of a conversation or adding them to one’s email signature block may make others more comfortable to disclose their own and prevent misgendering in the workplace.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Although encouraging employees to share their pronouns is conducive to creating an inclusive workplace, it is important that pronoun disclosure remain an individual choice and not a mandate. An employee may not be ready to “come out” and disclose their gender identity to their colleagues, and a mandate would create unnecessary pressure and stress. Additionally, mandating all employees to use pronouns may come off as performative allyship, especially if employees are uncertain or unable to articulate why correct pronoun usage is important. Another important mistake to avoid is using the word “preferred” or “chosen” in the context of gender pronouns. Using either word suggests that gender identity is a preference or a choice, when it is neither.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION & RESOURCES

SAMPLE SIGNATURE BLOCKS

Willow, M.S.W.

(Pronouns: They, Elle, Iel)

Program Analyst
Sexual & Gender Minority Research Office
Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives
Office of the Director
National Institutes of Health

Karen L. Parker, Ph.D., M.S.W.

Director
[Sexual & Gender Minority Research Office](#)
Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives
Office of the Director, NIH
Pronouns: she & her
Join the SGMRO [Listserv](#)

Shyam Patel

Communications Lead
[Sexual & Gender Minority Research Office](#)
DPCPSI, Office of the Director
National Institutes of Health
Pronouns: He, His, Him
Join the NIH [SGM Listserv](#)

ADDITIONAL GENDER-NEUTRAL / GENDER-INCLUSIVE PRONOUNS

(Adapted from [Gender Pronouns Guide from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee LGBTQ+ Resource Center](#))

A gender-neutral or gender-inclusive pronoun is a pronoun which does not associate a gender with the individual who is being discussed. Some languages, such as English, do not have a designated or formal gender neutral or third gender pronoun available, and this has been criticized because in many instances, writers and speakers use “he/his” when referring to a generic individual in the third person. Also, the dichotomy of “he and she” in English does not leave room for other gender identities, which can be exclusive of the transgender, gender nonbinary, and genderqueer communities. It is important to note that it is becoming increasingly acceptable to use the singular “they/them” as pronouns for gender nonbinary people and to refer to individuals whose gender identity is unknown. In 2019, [Merriam-Webster](#) updated the definition of “they” in their dictionary to include “used to refer to a single person whose gender is intentionally not revealed” and “used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary.”

People who are limited by languages that do not include gender neutral pronouns or do not accept the singular “they/them” have attempted to create new pronouns in the interest of greater equality. Some of these inclusive pronoun series have been developed and adopted by SGM communities. Examples are provided in the table to the right.

| HE/SHE | HIM/HER | HIS/HER | HIS/HERS | HIMSELF/HERSELF |
|-------------|---------|---------|----------|-----------------|
| They | them | their | theirs | themselves |
| Zie | zim | zir | zis | zieself |
| Sie | sie | hir | hirs | hirsself |
| Ey | em | eir | eirs | eirself |
| Ve | ver | vis | vers | verself |
| Tey | ter | tem | ters | terself |
| E | em | eir | eirs | emself |

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [“What are Gender Pronouns? Why Do They Matter?”](#) NIH Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Blog Gemma Martin, Louis Choporis, and Bali White, May 2020
- [Use of Pronouns in External and Internal Communications](#), Washington State Government
- [“Should your email say if you’re he, she or they?”](#) BBC News—Business, February 2020
- [“What’s Your Pronoun? Strategies for Inclusion in the Workplace,”](#) Out and Equal, May 2020
- [“New Year’s Reflections & the Importance of Pronouns,”](#) NIH SGMRO Director’s Corner Blog Karen Parker, January 2020