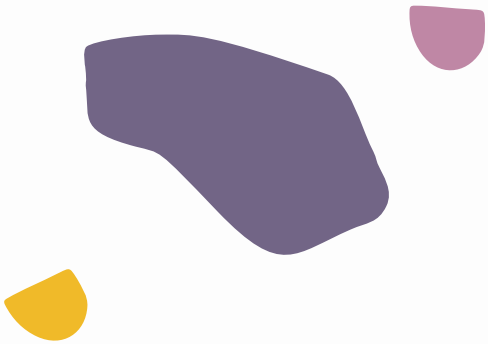
Asking About Gender

A TOOLKIT FOR YOUTH WORKERS

YOUTHREX Research & Evaluation eXchange

LGBT youthline 25 YEARS OF YOUTH RESILIENCE



This toolkit was developed and designed by Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) at the School of Social Work, York University, in partnership with LGBT YouthLine.

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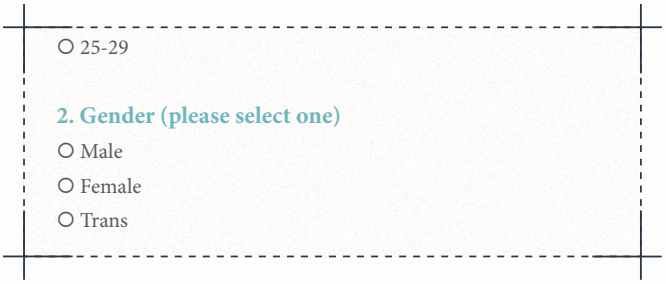
INTRODUCTION

The way that we ask about gender is important.

Every one of us wants to be acknowledged for who we are – to be respected, and to be referred to accurately and appropriately. Unfortunately, some people are regularly denied this right. Statistical evidence confirms that youth who identify as trans, gender non-conforming, non-binary, and Two-spirit are routinely identified by genders, names, and pronouns that they do not subscribe to, and that this has serious consequences for their safety and wellbeing.

When our gender menus fail to make space for all gender identities, we continue to perpetuate harm against youth whose identities fall outside of the gender binary. In order to respect all youth, we must ensure that the way we ask about gender reflects the diversity of our lived realities.

Look familiar? We've all encountered inaccurate and harmful gender menus that look a little bit like this:



So, what assumptions are embedded in this ***problematic*** gender menu? Let's break it down.

ASSUMPTION 01.
SEX = GENDER

Where it shows up:

'Male' and 'female' are listed as gender options.

Why it's wrong:

By including the options 'male' and 'female', which are biological terms that refer to a person's sex, this menu conflates sex and gender.

While sex refers to biology, gender refers to embodiments and expressions. Sex and gender are often used interchangeably because our society has effectively paired the two: those who are biologically determined to be 'male' at birth are assigned the 'man' gender, and those who are biologically determined to be 'female' at birth are assigned the 'woman' gender.

But our biological sex is *also* not a binary. Many of us are not exclusively or distinctly 'male' or 'female', but, rather, combine physical/physiological characteristics of both. Further, our sex profile is not static and can change over time and/or with intervention. **Sex is not an either-or option – it is a continuum upon which we are all differently and fluidly situated**.

Nevertheless, gender is not sex. Gender consists of socially-constructed sets of behaviours, performances, and roles that are not dependent upon, or related to, our biology! The conflation of sex and gender is not only inaccurate, but also undermines the personhood of youth who do not have a socially-validated alignment between their sex and gender – primarily, youth who are intersex, trans, and/or gender non-conforming.

ASSUMPTION 02.
YOU CAN EITHER BE A 'MAN' OR A 'WOMAN'

Where it shows up:

'Gender non-conforming' and 'non-binary' are not listed as gender options.

Why it's wrong:

Since gender is socially constructed, not biologically determined, it includes a diversity of options beyond the man/woman binary.

Mainstream gender 'rules' are created and sustained through our collective participation in them. Our strong identification with the gender binary (i.e., the categories 'man' and 'woman') reflects the power of our socialization in organizing our sense of self and shaping our engagement with the world around us. **There is nothing wrong with identifying with these roles, but we must also recognize and respect those who circumvent them.**

Failing to include options for those who do not identify with prescribed gender roles neglects the identities and experiences of gender non-conforming and non-binary youth. It also limits the possibilities for everyone to question, interrogate, and expand their relationship to sex and gender.

ASSUMPTION 03.
'TRANS' IS A DISTINCT AND COMPREHENSIVE GENDER IDENTITY

Where it shows up:

'Trans' is listed as an exclusive option for gender.

Why it's wrong:

'Trans' and other gender categories are not mutually exclusive.

While 'man' and 'woman' refer to a person's gender identity, 'trans' refers to a person's gender journey: the process through which they have arrived at their gender identity. **It is entirely possible – and, in fact, common – for a person to identify as 'trans' as well as 'man', 'woman' or another gender.**

Trans youth are routinely subject to the denial of their gender. This is a form of violence that undermines their wellbeing and safety, and contradicts a basic principle of respect – the expectation we all have, regardless of our gender identity, to be referred to accurately and appropriately. Implying that 'trans' cannot co-exist with other gender options perpetuates this form of gender denial.

ASSUMPTION 04.
CIS IS 'NORMAL'

Where it shows up:

'Cis' is not included alongside 'trans' as a gender option.

Why it's wrong:

The failure to include 'cis' alongside 'trans' suggests that identifying as cis is 'normal'.

One way that social privilege manifests is through invisibility – a collective failure to notice that which is considered to be the 'norm'. While many of us know that 'trans' refers to a person who does not identify with the sex and/or gender they were assigned at birth, fewer are familiar with the term 'cis': a state of identifying with the sex and/or gender assigned at birth. This invisibility is also evident in social expectations that people who identify as trans must 'come out'.

Framing 'cis' as the (invisible) default perpetuates the notion that being anything else is 'different'. This others youth who identify as trans, non-conforming, and non-binary, and re-enforces the limitations of dominant gender norms – those that make it difficult (and even dangerous) for any of us to express ourselves beyond the sex/gender binary.

ASSUMPTION 05.
WESTERN GENDER AND SEX FRAMEWORKS ARE NEUTRAL AND ADEQUATE

Where it shows up:

'Two-spirit' is not included as a gender option.

Why it's wrong:

Western frameworks of sex and gender are not universal.

Humans across time and space have had a multitude of ways for conceptualizing of, and engaging with, sex and gender. A tactic, and effect, of colonialism and imperialism has been the imposition of Western ways of knowing and being onto subjugated populations. One of the foundational tasks of the Canadian settler-colonial project was the disciplining of Indigenous gender and sexual practices, which did not conform to European standards of heterosexuality, cis-binary gender, and monogamy.

Since 1990, the term 'Two-spirit' has been used by many Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island to identify their gender and/or sexual identity, and role within their communities. The term was first introduced by Elder Myra Laramee, who had a vision prior to the 1990 Annual Inter-tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference. It is important to note that being Two-spirit is a fluid identity, and that individuals, communities, and Nations may have their own understandings, teachings, and language.

Failing to include 'Two-spirit' in the gender menu is an act of colonial erasure: it sustains the authority of Western sex/gender frameworks, while failing to acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous communities in defining their own personhood and relationality.

ASKING ABOUT GENDER

An Inclusive Gender Menu

Gender menus often fail to make space for identities that fall outside of the gender binary.

This not only perpetuates harm against gender non-conforming and non-binary youth, but it also limits the possibilities of everyone to question, interrogate, and expand their relationship to sex and gender.

So, what does a more inclusive (and accurate!) gender menu look like?

PART 01.
WHAT IS YOUR GENDER? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

- ☐ Boy/man
- ☐ Girl/woman
- ☐ Cisgender
- ☐ Intersex
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Non-conforming
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Two-spirit (for Indigenous people)
- ☐ Questioning/exploring
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ I identify with another gender: _____

PART 02.
DEFINITIONS

Boy/man: A gender identity born out of the gender binary. Boys/men have diverse gender expressions.

Girl/woman: A gender identity born out of the gender binary. Girls/women have diverse gender expressions.

Cisgender: The state of identifying with the sex and/or gender assigned to one at birth.

Intersex: A blanket term adopted by those whose biology or physiology diverges from the male/female binary.

Non-binary: The state of not identifying with either of the binary sex and/or gender options, i.e., male/female or man/woman.

Non-conforming: Another term describing the state of not identifying with either of the binary sex and/or gender options, i.e., male/female or man/woman.

Transgender: The state of not connecting to or identifying with the sex and/or gender assigned to one at birth.

Two-spirit: An identity used by many Indigenous folks that describes their gender and/or sexuality, and role within community. People who are not indigenous to Turtle Island are not invited to use this term.

Questioning/exploring: A term adopted by those who haven't (yet) arrived at a label to adequately describe their gendered self. A person can be questioning/exploring for the short or long-term, temporarily, or permanently.

HOW DOES THIS MENU ADDRESS THE FIVE ASSUMPTIONS?

01.
It recognizes the **distinction between sex and gender** by replacing the sex categories 'male' and 'female' with the gender categories 'girl/woman' and 'boy/man'.

02.
It acknowledges **gender embodiment and expression beyond the binary** by including the categories 'non-binary' and 'non-conforming'.

03.
It recognizes that **gender categories are not mutually exclusive** by allowing respondents to select multiple options.

04.
It includes the 'cisgender' category, which is commonly made invisible because it is assumed to be the norm.

05.
It recognizes that **Western gender frameworks are not universal**, and acknowledges Indigenous gender structures by including the 'Two-spirit' option.

Additionally, by allowing youth to *write in* a non-listed gender, this menu also recognizes **the infinite number of ways that people may inhabit, experience, and describe their gendered realities**. For example, while 'Two-spirit' is used by some Indigenous folks, many others instead or additionally use identities/terms specific to their languages, ones that reflect their particular identities and roles within their communities.

Making space for writing in a gender represents the **structural integration of humility** into our forms – the recognition that we can never fully capture the range of identity labels and, thus, the need to be permanently available to accommodate those we had not yet considered or conceived of. This humility is a pre-condition for being responsive to the needs of those we serve.

Finally, this menu also includes definitions. The terms we use here for describing various embodiments, trajectories, and expressions of gender are **products of our time, place, and language**. By defining them, we reflect recognition of their non-universality and hence the need to establish what we mean by their usage. Furthermore, this allows for our gender menus to become not just a site for documenting our diverse gender realities but, also, for educating others about this diversity and how we describe it.

GLOSSARY

Cis
The state of identifying with the sex and/or gender assigned to one at birth.

Gender
A social aspect of personhood, related to expectations about an individual's behaviour and presentation (i.e., gender roles and expressions). Although dominant gender frameworks suggest that there are only two gender options ('man' and 'woman'), which align with the two sexes ('male' and 'female'), there is nothing inherently mandatory about this system.

Gender non-conforming (or gender non-binary)
The state of not identifying with either of the binary sex and/or gender options, i.e., male/female or man/woman.

Intersex
A blanket term applied to those whose biology or physiology diverges from the male/female binary. Being intersex refers to aspects of a person's body, and not their gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation.

Pronouns
Words that replace nouns – for example, using 'it' instead of 'the house'; 'he' instead of 'Dylan'; 'she' instead of Jaime. In the English language, pronouns are gendered – i.e. the pronouns we use to describe people are specific to their gender. Because we are socialized into particular expectations about gender, we generally make assumptions about the gender a person identifies with, and, as such, apply to that person the pronouns that conform to that assumption. This can result in inaccuracy and harm, when the visual/other cues we automatically use to determine a person's gender do not apply. The best way to know a person's gender, and the pronouns they use, is to ask!

Self-identify
The act of defining one's own gender or other aspect of the self. Gender is not a biological given or an immutable fact; any gender label is therefore only accurate to the extent to which a person subscribes to it. It is the right of every person to self-identify their own gender.

Sex
A combination of biological and physiological attributes – such as chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy – which situate an individual along the male-female spectrum. While our biological sex is assigned to us at birth based on our genitalia, and is usually identified as either 'male' or 'female', many of us exist between these two binary poles. Sex can change over time and/or with intervention.

Trans
The state of not connecting or identifying with the sex and/or gender assigned to one at birth. While some trans people pursue medical intervention in order to reconcile their physiological attributes with their gender identity, others do not see this as necessary or desirable. Some trans people identify as 'man' or 'woman', and others do not.

Transphobia
The collection of ideas, norms, and behaviours that police social adherence to gender norms, and result in violence/discrimination against trans and gender non-conforming people. Transphobia is both explicit (e.g., hate crimes and bullying) and implicit (e.g., the expectation that 'boys don't cry'). Transphobia intersects with other forms of oppression to disproportionately expose trans people who are women/femmes, people of colour, poor, neuro-divergent and/or disabled to violence and discrimination.

Two-spirit
A contemporary term adopted by many Indigenous people to describe their gender and/or sexuality, and role within community. The term was first introduced by Elder Myra Laramee, who had a vision prior to the 1990 Annual Inter-tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference. It is important to note that being Two-spirit is a fluid identity, and that individuals, communities, and Nations have their own understandings, teachings, and language.

YOUTHREX
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Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) is a province-wide initiative based at the School of Social Work at York University.

OUR MISSION is to make research evidence and evaluation practices accessible and relevant to Ontario's grassroots youth sector through capacity building, knowledge exchange, and evaluation leadership.

OUR VISION is an Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth.

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