

# Asking about gender

*If you have not done so yet, we invite you to start by reading the [general guidelines for asking about demographic information](#). Asking for demographic information is often key to better understanding our society and the inequities within it. However, demographic data is often personal and its collection can raise ethical concerns.*

## 1.0 Why asking matters

We often ask about gender by default. However, as with other demographic information, relevance is key: only ask for this information if it is relevant for your research question(s).

Asking for sex or gender when it is not necessary or relevant can negatively impact your research. For example, it can lead people to assume you are interested in gender-based conclusions, or it can discourage participation from some people if they do not see themselves reflected in the categories you are using.

This does not mean that you should never ask about gender. Using existing literature can help you determine if gender matters in the context of your research questions, or how to hone your research questions to intentionally examine gender.

There is a large body of research dedicated to the multiple ways gender can impact teaching and learning, both for students and for instructors. Although the focus tends to be on cisgender men and women, some research is starting to also examine the experiences of trans and non-binary people in education. This suggests that gender may be relevant for some people looking at the scholarship of teaching and learning.

## 2.0 Language about gender and sex

Researchers often ask participants to identify their gender or sex, but there is sometimes confusion about what vocabulary should be used or what different terms mean.

- **Sex** refers to physical and physiological features including chromosomes, hormone levels and function, and reproductive anatomy. Sex is usually presented as a binary (female or male) but it is not: there is variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed. Sex is usually irrelevant in the context of teaching and learning.
- **Gender** refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of men, women and non-binary people. It is about how people perceive themselves and each other, as well as the distribution of power and resources in our society.
- **Legal sex or gender** refers to the marker that appears on many identification documents. The two main categories are M and F but an increasing number of jurisdictions are making space for other categories, such as X or U (for Undisclosed). Because people can change their legal marker but do not always choose or want to do so (especially if no option is available besides M or F), this category does not provide reliable information about a person's sex or gender.
- **Gender identity** is about a person's internal identification as a man, woman or another gender, regardless of their gender expression. It may or may not be consistent with a person's legal gender marker that was assigned at birth based on that person's physical appearance.



- **Gender expression** is about how people express and communicate their gender through their appearance. People express and interpret gender through hairstyles, clothing, physical expression and mannerisms, physical alterations of their body, or by choosing a name that they feel reflects their gender identity.
- **Non-binary** is a term used to talk about people whose gender is outside of the binaries of man/woman and, sometimes, masculine/feminine. Some people use it as an individual identity ("I am a non-binary person"), or it can be an umbrella term to talk broadly about people and identities outside of the gender binary.
- **Cisgender** is a common umbrella term to talk about people whose gender matches the gender they were assigned at birth. Some people use the shortened cis.
- **Transgender** is a common umbrella term to talk about people whose gender does not match the gender that they were assigned at birth. Many people use the short version trans. The shorthand also recognizes that some people identify more with other terms (such as transsexual) or have mixed feelings about the word transgender.

For more definitions, visit [Trans Student Educational Resources](#).

## 3.0 Being specific and inclusive when asking about gender or sex

In a research project about teaching and learning, it is unlikely that you need to collect information about the bodies of your students. If gender could be relevant to your analysis, it is often because of a student's experience, social identity and perception of themselves (and others). This means asking about gender (woman/man/non-binary person) rather than sex (male/female).

### Should I ask participants if they are trans(gender)?

This depends on your research question. If you have determined that gender is relevant based on your research questions, ask yourself why it might be relevant. If a person's lived experience as trans(gender) might matter for your research, you should consider asking.

Make sure that you ask in a way so people can identify their trans lived experience and their gender identity. Many trans people primarily identify as men and women and cannot correctly answer a survey question whose design forces them to choose between their gender and their trans lived experience.

Please indicate your gender identity (select one):

- Man
- Women
- Transgender
- Choose not to answer

This kind of question is also poor survey design. When analyzing the data, it is impossible to know if a trans woman (for example) will choose to select "woman" or "trans." This uncertainty makes it necessary to form assumptions about the data that might be false and might undercount the number of participants with trans lived experience.

### Should I ask participants if they are non-binary?

Not everyone is a woman or a man. If you have determined that gender is relevant for your research, make sure that non-binary people can fill out your survey accurately by having an option that they can choose. In some cases, this can be done simply by adding a "non-binary person" option alongside the options of man/woman. Depending on your audience, you may need to provide a short definition.



## Should I use an “other” and/or open-ended field?

There are many terms that exist for genders outside of the woman/man binary: people may describe themselves as agender, genderfluid or genderqueer. Open-ended fields allow research participants to share their identity with you in more detail. This may be favourable in some contexts where this complexity can, and should be, discussed and acknowledged (e.g., qualitative research).

However, if you are collecting gender data for the purpose of statistical analysis, and if you will need to collapse or discard categories in order to have enough statistical power for your analyses, then open-ended fields are not recommended. They can give respondents the impression of inclusivity even though the data is either aggregated or left unused afterwards.

## 4.0 Examples of inclusive questions

The examples below are concrete examples of how questions about gender might be integrated into research.

These questions might not work in every context; we have highlighted some of their strengths and weaknesses to illustrate this point. Always keep in mind the three key principles of inclusive research to adapt to your own research: relevance, specificity and inclusion. In some cases, it might also help to explain to research participants why you are asking the question.

### **Two-step survey question recommended by TransFocus in its [report for the Office of BC Registrars](#)**

#### **What is your gender identity?**

- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary person
- Prefer not to answer

#### **Do you have lived experience as a trans person (meaning your gender identity does not align with your gender assigned at birth)?**

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

#### **PROS:**

Fewer categories make meaningful statistical analysis more likely; non-binary people are included; trans people can indicate their gender, their trans experience or both, as they prefer.

#### **CONS:**

Not everyone can see themselves reflected in three categories; trans people may wonder why they are asked to identify their lived experience.



### **Open-ended question**

What is your gender identity?



#### **PROS:**

Participants can define gender in their own terms with as much complexity as they want; everyone can see themselves meaningfully reflected in the question.



#### **CONS:**

Many different answers likely make statistical analysis impossible without recoding answers (and making assumptions in the process); participants might mix terms related to gender, sex and trans lived experience; the complexity of answers might be erased in reports and publications.

## **5.0 Additional resources**

- [FAQ on gender diversity \(UBC\)](#)
- [Positive Space Campaign \(UBC\)](#)
- [Beyond the Binary project \(UBC\)](#)
- [TransFocus report](#) for the Office of BC Registrars on the advantages and disadvantages of various ways to collect data on gender.
- Bauer, G. R., Braimoh, J., Scheim, A. I., & Dharma, C. (2017). Transgender-inclusive measures of sex/gender for population surveys: Mixed-methods evaluation and recommendations. PLoS ONE, 12(5). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0178043> (but we would recommend using gender terms—man and woman—rather than female/male when asking about gender)

