

Non Binary 101

by Liam York (they/them or he/him)

To understand non-binary experiences of gender, let's first review the concept of gender itself. Gender captures a wide range of traits, including social roles, expression and our sense of self. When a person's sense of self isn't able to be expressed through femaleness or maleness alone, the person may feel discomfort and seek to express their experience of gender as non-binary. Non-binary people, simply put, are people who experience gender in a way which is not exclusively male or female.

While there are many ways to be a woman or a man, it is also true that being a man is not the opposite of being a woman. If someone's experience of gender doesn't fit with being a man, it does not automatically make them a woman (and visa-versa). Over the past few decades, non-binary people have become more visible in our community.

With many people coming to hear about non-binary people for the first time, it isn't hard to mistake this identity as too far beyond typical human experiences. While most people experience gender as male or female, it is important we don't neglect those who experience gender in a way the words male or female can't describe.

An umbrella for the rest of us

Non-binary people can look like anyone and there is no one description to explain all non-binary people. It is helpful to know, that similar to the way experiences of gender as a man or as a woman are different, being both male and female is different to being neither. For some people, affirming a non-binary gender provides freedom of expression and healthier sense of self. These words don't capture all non-binary experiences, but what does tie non-binary people together are the shared experiences we are now beginning to recognise.

"While the term 'non-binary' is a relatively recent term, people that experience gender diversity have existed throughout history. Various words have been used to describe these identities across many languages. When we look back, we find many cultures and individuals who have experienced and accepted such gender diverse people."



For example, We'wha, who was a Native American of the Zuni tribe who lived in the late 1800's. We'wha's gender was referred to as Ihamana. We'wha also used both 'she' and 'he' pronouns and was seen as both male and female by others. We'wha was a renowned ambassador, craftsman and mediator and was highly respected both within his tribe, by other tribes and by the white colonisers she knew. The reason non-binary identities seem so new is that our world has become more connected. The new technologies and spaces have allowed people to feel safe to share, express their true selves and find others who are like them.

Pronouns: they/them/theirs

Many people are used to the pronouns they/them/theirs referring to a group of people. However, consider the example of a person standing some distance from you in a field, so far away you are not certain which pronoun to use. You might say to someone nearby "Do you know who they are?" Using they/them/theirs to refer to a single person has been common for centuries and is used by media outlets as a gender-neutral pronoun. Not every non-binary person uses 'they' pronouns, there are other gender-neutral pronouns too. Asking non-binary people which pronoun to use shows respect and support.

Showing what you know

Non-binary people are protected from discrimination under federal law. With knowledge of gender diverse people comes the task of ensuring they feel accepted and can live free from discrimination. It is easy to make a start in expressing acceptance by respecting people's pronouns and using gender neutral language.

Acknowledging non-binary people's presence, instead of only women's and men's, is another simple way to show courtesy. Speaking up for non-binary people in our community is another way to support and validate them. Ensuring forms have inclusive gender options, designating a bathroom as all gender, and ensuring uniform policies are supportive makes life safer for gender diverse people.

Celebrating Diversity

July 14th is International Non-Binary day. This day is perfect for showing support for non-binary people you know by acknowledging your support or learning about gender diversity across the world.

