



## De-Mystifying Gender Pronouns

### **At a glance**

- The concept of gender is expanding and our language around it is too. Everyone deserves to be called by their correct name and pronouns – it’s a matter of dignity and respect.
- It’s always OK to respectfully ask someone which gender pronouns they use. Never single out someone over their gender pronouns.
- In meetings and large groups, it can be challenging to ensure everyone feels included. Including pronouns on name tags, asking people to state their pronouns during introductions, or providing stickers or buttons are just some of the ways to make space for learning gender pronouns within the group.
- Don’t let others be disrespected. If you know someone is being mis-gendered or dead-named (using a person’s former name), respectfully let the speaker know the correct gender pronouns/name for that person.

Many of us are accustomed to binary gender pronouns – he/him/his or she/her/hers when referring to a person whose gender we know (or presume to know.) They/them/theirs is often used when we don’t know the gender of the person to whom we’re referring. This is especially true in the labor movement, where using the greeting “Sisters and Brothers” to show solidarity has been used for decades. Most of the labor community has moved to using “labor siblings” as a more inclusive replacement.

A few examples:

- Micah works second shift, he likes to sleep late most mornings.
- Pat is going on vacation next week to Puerto Rico, she’s planning to bring me back a souvenir.
- The new person will start next week, what did you say their name is?
- Good Morning! I am so happy to be here with all of my labor siblings at the AFL-CIO Convention!

Research has shown that gender isn’t quite as binary as we once believed, and our language needs to adapt to keep up with current understanding. It’s important to respect how others identify, but it can feel daunting to someone who isn’t used to the idea of non-binary gender.

### **Ask, ask, ask**

Don’t worry – we all make innocent mistakes and generally, folks will understand when you misspeak. Intentionally mis-gendering someone, or in other words, not using their correct pronouns, is incredibly disrespectful.

If you make an honest mistake with regard to someone’s gender identity or pronouns (and it happens to all of us at some point), simply say a quick “I’m sorry” and use their correct name/pronoun, then move on. There is no need to dwell on the error.

When you are in a setting that includes transgender and gender non-binary people, which pronoun to use may require you to listen and sometimes even ask the person what their pronouns are. For example:

- It’s so nice to meet you, Alex. I didn’t catch your pronouns; which pronouns do you use?

- Hi, I'm Gretchen. They/them are my pronouns. How do you like to be addressed?

There are many ways you can ask someone their pronouns. Just remember – if you are unsure of someone's gender, it's worse not to ask at all than to stumble over your words.

There are a lot of pronouns in use today that you may encounter, but there are three that are the most common: he/him/his, she/her/hers, and they/them/theirs.

### Meetings and large groups

There are several ways you can manage pronouns in meetings and large groups. Any, all, or none of these could be adapted for your specific situation:

- Collect information at registration and include gender pronouns on name tags
- Ask those who are comfortable to do so to state their pronouns when they introduce themselves to the group
- Share your own pronouns when the group in your introduction and encourage others to do the same
- Make available pronoun buttons so anyone who wants to can pick one up to indicate their pronouns

These are just a few of the most common examples. **It's never OK to single out anyone or make it seem like you're focusing on pronouns just for their benefit.**

### Correcting others

Being mis-gendered can make someone feel disrespected or offended. If you are in a group and someone in the group is mis-gendered, allow that person space to correct the speaker about their pronouns. If given the chance to speak, be sure to use the appropriate pronouns when referring to that person. Some people don't like a lot of attention paid to their pronouns while others may feel strongly. If it happens repeatedly or seems intentional, it's OK to ask the mis-gendered person if they would like for you to correct folks if it continues.

If someone who isn't present is mis-gendered, gently, and maybe discreetly, correct the speaker and let them know the other person's pronouns. For example:

- I think Adrian uses they/them/their pronouns, but yes, aren't they a great worker?

### What can labor do?

- Organized Labor's role has always been to ensure the dignity and respect of working people. This is no different. **Every working person deserves to be called by their correct name and pronouns.**
- **A collective bargaining agreement that includes sexual orientation and gender identity and expression as classes protected from discrimination can help.** If an employer or fellow employee is repeatedly and intentionally mis-gendering someone, that is discrimination and should be dealt with under the terms of the collective bargaining agreement.
- Contracts can also contain specific language about how to treat transgender and gender non-binary workers. **Proper usage of pronouns should be included in that language.**
- **Pride at Work staff is always ready to provide support on this or other LGBTQ-related topics.** We can help ensure your contract language is inclusive of LGBTQ working people and uses the most up to date language. We can also review talking points to help hone your message when talking to the media or lobbying state and local government. Other resources include training programs for leadership, staff, or rank-and-file members; convention, conference, or meeting speakers and panelists; and much more.

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