

IOM GUIDANCE

ON GENDER-INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION



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INTRODUCTION

This guidance is intended to support IOM offices and programs in producing gender-inclusive internal and external communication. In this context, gender-inclusive communication is communication that references all gender identities and uses appropriate terminology to describe gender diversity.

For more information on relevant terms and definitions, as well as inclusive definitions of many commonly-used gender terms, please see the IOM Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Glossary on the IOM Intranet under About IOM – Diversity and Inclusion in IOM Programming – Guidance. The site also houses gender-inclusive signage, guidance on LGBTIQ+ and disability inclusion in IOM offices and facilities and a wide range of training resources and other materials.

GENERAL GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

There are a wide range of gender identities beyond man and woman. It is important we do not exclude individuals by using binary language. For instance, the phrase “migrant men and women” excludes individuals who identify as non-binary, gender fluid, agender and with other gender identities. Thus, unless we are purposefully referencing persons of a particular gender, our language should be inclusive of all genders. It is also important that the terms sex (bodily sex characteristics) and gender (a social designation) are not used interchangeably, and that our language represents the lived realities of people with diverse SOGIESC.

| USE THIS | NOT THIS | NOTES |
|-------------------------|-----------------|---|
| ✓ People of all genders | ✗ Men and women | Diverse gender identity has existed globally throughout |

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| | | history. As a result of colonialism, indigenous people across the world have, for many decades, experienced erasure of their diverse gender identities and expressions. |
| ✓ People of all genders and ages | ✗ Men, women, boys and girls | |
| ✓ People of all genders, sexual orientations, gender expressions and sex characteristics | ✗ Men, women and LGBTIQ+ people | |
| ✓ People of all genders, including people with diverse sexual orientations, gender expressions and sex characteristics | ✗ Men and women, including those who are LGBTIQ+ | |
| ✓ People of all genders and ages, including people with diverse sexual orientations, gender expressions and sex characteristics | ✗ Men, women, boys and girls, including those who are LGBTIQ+ | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The migrant ✓ The individual ✓ The staff member ✓ They (singular or plural) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ He/she ✗ S/he ✗ He or she | The sentence can also be rewritten so that it does not require pronouns. |
| ✓ Gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Sex ✗ Sex/gender | Use gender rather than sex, except when referring to sex designations, for instance the sex listed on an official document. Avoid sex/gender as it incorrectly implies the terms are interchangeable. |
| ✓ Sex assigned at birth / Sex as listed on an official document | ✗ Sex | Where references to sex are specifically required. |

| USE THIS | NOT THIS | NOTES |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Current name OR name ✓ Current pronouns OR pronouns ✓ Current title OR title | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Preferred name, pronouns or title ✗ Chosen name, pronouns or title | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mr., Ms., Mrs., and Mx. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Mr., Ms., Mrs. | Use no titles, if possible. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Criminalized (e.g. Same-gender relationships are criminalized in [COUNTRY].) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Illegal | When referring to same-gender relationships and diverse gender identities in countries with relevant criminal penalties. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Within society (e.g. Same-gender relationships are stigmatized within the society.) ✓ Societal context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Within / by the general population ✗ Cultural context | “Within the general population” implies LGBTIQ+ people are not part of the general population. “Cultural context” implies there is just one culture in a society. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Pregnant individual / person ✓ Pregnant child / adolescent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Pregnant woman ✗ Pregnant girl | Not all individuals who carry pregnancies, give birth and feed children identify as women or mothers. Trans men, non-binary people and people with diverse genders also get pregnant, give birth and nurse. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Feeding ✓ Individuals who are nursing ✓ Nursing or lactation room / facility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Breastfeeding ✗ Breastfeeding mothers ✗ Breastfeeding room / facility | Not all individuals who feed babies identify as women or mothers, and not all people who feed babies do so by nursing or lactating – some feed using formula. |

DISAGGREGATED GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

At times and for various reasons, you will need to disaggregate genders, for instance, in introductory text that is followed by a section on each gender category. The following are examples of specific, gender-inclusive language:

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| ✓ Men, women and people with diverse gender identities | ✗ Men, women and LGBTIQ+ people | |
| ✓ Men, women and people with diverse genders | ✗ Men, women and people of other genders | “Diverse” is preferred over the term “other” in instances where you must specify gender categories. |
| ✓ Men, women and people with diverse gender identities, including those with diverse sexual orientations and sex characteristics | ✗ Men, women and LGBTI people | When you wish to use gender-specific language that highlights the inclusion of intersex people and people with diverse sexual orientations. |
| ✓ Women [Men], inclusive of transgender, cisgender, gender-diverse and intersex women [men] | ✗ Women [Men] | When you wish to be specific about the inclusion of women [men] with all gender identities and those who are intersex. |

SOGIESC-SPECIFIC INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Sexual orientation and gender are thought of as closely linked due to societal expectations placed on individuals in relation to their perceived gender. Likewise, sex characteristics and gender are thought of as closely linked because an individual’s sex as assigned at birth is typically the basis of the gender attributed to them by society. The following are brief explanations of the SOGIESC-related acronyms we use:

LGBTIQ+

is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer, and inclusive of individuals with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and/or sex characteristics who use other terms or no terms to describe themselves. It may be ordered LGBTIQ+ or in other ways, depending on the geographical location and language. Additional characters may be added, such as A for asexual, agender or ally, 2S for Two-Spirit or P for pansexual. In many locations, the letter order varies, e.g., LGBTQI+ or GBLTQI+. SOGIESC-related acronyms are not static and continue to evolve over time. To ensure inclusivity and accuracy, they should be applied with careful consideration to the individuals being referenced.

SOGIESC

is an acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. “Diverse SOGIESC” may be preferred in some contexts over LGBTIQ+ because it does not contain identity terms that are perceived as Western and is inclusive of individuals who do not identify with specific terms. For that reason, IOM has widely adopted “diverse SOGIESC”, especially in the global context. However, LGBTIQ+ is still

acceptable in a wide variety of contexts and many IOM offices use LGBTIQ+ or a variation because it is appropriate in that geographical or cultural context and/or more familiar to donors and partners.

Note on the Term “Diverse SOGIESC”

“Diverse” is preferred over “other” in instances where you must specify gender categories because “other” can imply a de-centering of identities outside the male-female binary and may sound dismissive of the wide range of gender identities that exist. “Diverse SOGIESC” is a phrase that is used widely within the international context. It emphasizes that having a SOGIESC outside the mainstream is a part of human diversity. Diversity in human sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics exists across the world and throughout history and is celebrated by the UN, as are all forms of diversity.

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| ACRONYMS | | |
| ✓ LGBTIQ+ people [individuals] | ✗ LGBTIQ+s | |
| ✓ LGBTQ+ people [individuals] | | When the text is not inclusive of intersex individuals. |
| ✓ LGBTQ+ and intersex people [individuals] | | When there is a reason to draw a distinction between LGBTQ+ people and intersex people in the text that follows. |
| SEXUAL ORIENTATION | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gay people ✓ Gay men ✓ Gay women | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Gays / the gays ✗ Homosexuals ✗ LGB | |
| ✓ Lesbians | ✗ Lesbian people | Note that, in English, “gay” is an adjective while “lesbian” is a noun. Thus, you say “gay people” and “lesbians” but not “gays” and “lesbian people.” |
| ✓ People with diverse sexual orientations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Homosexuals ✗ LGB | |
| ✓ Same-gender (e.g. same-gender attraction) | ✗ Same-sex | Except when referring to legal instruments which specify sex. |

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| GENDER IDENTITY | | |
| ✓ Diverse genders | ✗ Other genders | “Diverse” is preferred over “other” when referring to genders outside the binary. |
| ✓ Trans/transgender people | ✗ Transgenders | Transgender is an adjective and should never be used as a noun. |
| ✓ Trans/transgender | | Where transgender is used, to be inclusive of individuals who identify as either. |
| ✓ People with diverse gender identities | | When referring to all people whose gender identity is outside the male-female gender binary. |
| ✓ People with diverse gender identities, including transgender and non-binary people | | When you wish to expand on diverse gender identities using examples. |
| ✓ Non-binary | ✗ Gender non-conforming | When referring to gender <i>identities</i> that fall outside the male / female binary. |
| GENDER EXPRESSION | | |
| ✓ Gender non-conforming | | When referring to gender <i>expression</i> that differs from norms for binary genders in a particular society. |
| ✓ People with diverse gender expression, including gender non-conforming people | | When referring to diverse gender expressions using examples. |
| ✓ People with diverse gender identities and expressions, including transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming people | | When you wish to expand on diverse gender identities <i>and</i> gender expressions using examples. |

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| SEX CHARACTERISTICS | | |
| ✓ Intersex people or people with intersex variations | ✗ Hermaphrodites | “Hermaphrodite” is an inaccurate term. It implies that a person is born with two sets of genitals, which cannot occur. [See Intersex Society of North America .] |

FORMS, SURVEYS AND DATABASES

Below are the options that should be provided in forms, surveys and databases. See the explanations that follow for further information on the write-in options and sex and gender categories. It is critical that the questions can be answered safely and confidentially; otherwise, the data may be skewed because the individuals completing the forms and surveys will not feel comfortable or safe being honest. Respondents should also be able to choose more than one option when answering each question.

Sex (If in question form: What is the sex marker on your official document?)

- F - Female
- M - Male
- A - Another designation (O, T, X)
- P - Prefer not to disclose

Do you have an intersex variation? Y - Yes / N - No / P - Prefer not to disclose

Gender (If in question form: What is your gender? or What is your gender identity?)

- W - Woman (note this term is inclusive of both cisgender and trans/transgender women)
- M - Man (note this term is inclusive of both cisgender and trans/transgender men)
- NG - No gender
- NB - Non-binary
- T - Trans/transgender
- TM - Trans/transgender man
- TW - Trans/transgender woman
- ID - My gender is: _____ [with write-in]
- P - Prefer not to disclose

Sexual Orientation (If in question form: What is your sexual orientation?)

- A - Asexual
- B - Bisexual

- G - Gay
- H - Heterosexual (Straight)
- L - Lesbian
- P - Pansexual
- Q - Queer
- ID - My sexual orientation is: _____ [with write-in]
- P - Prefer not to disclose

Notes on Write-in Options:

The write-in box is critical to ensuring individuals who do not use any of the terms offered to describe their gender identity or sexual orientation have a mechanism by which they can share the terms they use with us. IOM may also use this write-in data to identify patterns and changes in language that could inform future updates to these lists.

Note that if the survey being conducted is administered by IOM personnel, the write-in options under Gender and Sexual Orientation could be “ID – Identifies as: _____ [with write-in].” However, if the survey is self-administered, it is more grammatically appropriate to state “ID – My gender is: _____ [with write-in]” or “ID – My sexual orientation is: _____ [with write-in].”

Notes on Sex:

Under sex, “Another designation (O, T, X)” represents sex designations on passports, and in some cases birth certificates and other forms of identification documents, in a variety of countries, including Australia (X), Bangladesh (O/Other), Canada (X), Denmark (X), Germany (X), Iceland (X), India (T/Third Gender), Ireland (self-declared), Malta (X), Nepal (O/Third Gender), Netherlands (X), Pakistan (X) and New Zealand (X).

If an individual chooses “Another designation (e.g. O, T, X)” under sex, it does not necessarily mean they are intersex. Individuals with intersex variations may have a sex designation of male, female or other on their official documents. “Another designation” is also used to categorize third gender or non-binary individuals.

In most forms and surveys, the gender category alone is typically sufficient to gather necessary diversity data. Only include *both* sex and gender categories if documentation of sex is required, for instance because a form or administrative system requires it, or for medical purposes. The intersex variation question should only be used alongside the sex category when there is a reason to gather data on the prevalence of intersex individuals. Sexual orientation options should only be included if the data is being used for a clear and explainable purpose that disclosed to survey or form participants.

Notes on Gender:

There should not be an “Other” category under gender. “Other” is not a gender identity and the designation may be considered offensive. Transgender people may choose from any relevant category. For example, a transgender woman could select “Woman”, “Trans/transgender” “Trans/transgender woman”, or utilize the write-in option.

There should not be a “Gender non-conforming” category under gender. “Gender non-conforming” is a gender expression, or a description of someone’s gender, not a gender identity.

The terms “Man” and “Woman” are inclusive of cisgender and trans/transgender men and women and are provided for those individuals who identify as “man” or “woman”. The separate categories “Trans/transgender man” and “Trans/transgender woman” are provided for those individuals who identify as both trans/transgender and as men or women. The category “Trans/transgender” is provided for those transgender individuals who identify simply as trans/transgender.

Note that the term cisgender is purposely not included in the list of options, for three reasons:

1. Offering the options “cisgender man / cisgender woman” and “trans/transgender man / trans/transgender woman” presents an individual with two options: to either disclose they are trans/transgender, which they may not feel safe or comfortable doing, or to falsely categorize themselves as cisgender for reasons of self-protection and privacy, which may cause emotional and mental harm.
2. Trans/transgender individuals who identify as men and women should be able to choose those options just as a cisgender person would, with no requirement that they disclose their trans status in the process and no challenge to their right to autonomy in identifying their own gender and being believed.
3. It is uncommon for cisgender individuals to list their gender identity as cisgender and using that term may result in cause confusion.

Further note that we use “man” and “woman” rather than “male” and “female” under gender, as “male” and “female” refer to sex characteristics, not gender identity.

In instances in which not all options can be provided, typically because the form or survey is linked to a database that has limited gender options, the minimum options offered should be Man, Woman, My gender is: _____ [with write-in] and Prefer Not to Disclose. There are few instances in which the full range of options cannot reasonably be offered, and the reasons for excluding individuals from the list should be clear and defensible at the time the survey or form is created.

ADDRESSING TRANS/TRANSGENDER, NON-BINARY, GENDER-DIVERSE AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING INDIVIDUALS

Transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming people, like everyone else, want to be addressed with the correct pronoun, as well as name, gender and title. Typically, transgender women use “she” and transgender men use “he,” but if you don’t know what pronouns someone uses, it is best to politely ask. Common gender-neutral pronouns in English are they, them and their; for example, “Someone left *their* bag on the train. I hope *they* remembered to take *their* wallet with *them*.” It can help to practice by creating sample sentences or using a web-based tool such as <https://www.practicewithpronouns.com>.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q

Why do we avoid using the word **sex**, except in specific instances, such as in reference to passport designations?

A

The term sex refers to an individual's **physical sex characteristics**. Sex is typically assigned to a person at birth based on the appearance of their external genitalia. An individual's gender identity may or may not align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Typically, when we refer to someone's "sex," we are referring to the gender attributed to the individual by society and not to their physical sex characteristics or to the sex designation on their official documentation, such as a passport or birth certificate. This is why the terms "sex" and "gender" are so often used interchangeably, despite meaning very different things.

Referring to individuals by sex or by sex and gender is usually unnecessary and can result in the exclusion of some people, including transgender individuals. Unless you are referring to physical sex characteristics for a specific and justifiable reason, only gender should be used. The use of gender also applies to the phrases where sex is normally used, e.g., "same-gender couple," "same-gender marriage" and "different-gender relationship."

Q

Why can't I say, "men, women, and LGBTIQ+ people"? Isn't that **inclusive**?

A

The **gender categories** "men and women" already include individuals who identify as male and female and are LGBTIQ+; thus, it is redundant to say "and LGBTIQ+ people" as if *all* LGBTIQ+ people are a separate category from men and women. Simultaneously, specifying "men and women" but not specifying other genders can be read as exclusionary, and positions the gender identities of man and woman as superior to that of non-binary and other gender diverse individuals.

Q

I work in a location where SOGIESC issues are **sensitive**. How can I ensure my communication is both inclusive and contextually appropriate?

A

Many offices have found when shifting to **gender-inclusive communication** that swapping phrases such as "people of all genders" with "men and women" raises no concerns amongst readers, yet sends an important message to people with diverse genders that they are a part of IOM's programming considerations and are welcome to access IOM assistance. There are additionally many ways to re-word sentences in order to avoid referring to pronouns or gender at all, which can help you produce gender-inclusive communication.

Q

I work in a location where SOGIESC issues are **sensitive**. How can I discuss SOGIESC issues with colleagues and partners?

A

Human rights abuses against people with diverse SOGIESC are a part of the larger problem of **gender-based violence (GBV)**, because at its root, people with diverse SOGIESC are persecuted for transgressing gender norms – whether it’s because they don’t love the people they’re expected to love in accordance with their gender or they don’t exhibit the behaviors attached to their sex assigned at birth. Discussions surrounding SOGIESC can thus take place in the larger context of gender, with a focus on gender roles, gender norms, the gender binary and what happens to those who transgress it. The transgression of gender norms of course also applies to heterosexual, cisgender and endosex people, so it’s an approach that is easy for many people to understand.

When presenting **SOGIESC-related training material**, it’s useful to remind learners that they will invariably have a person with diverse SOGIESC walk through their door at some point, and that it’s in their best interest to know how to respond in order to avoid feeling unprepared or uncomfortable. This approach is supportive of employees and highlights the end goal of fulfilling our professional mandate to assist all migrants appropriately and with dignity and respect.

Q

When I write “men and women,” do I need to add the phrase, “including men and women who are **transgender**” to ensure the reader knows we are inclusive?

A

Some men and women are transgender, gender-diverse or intersex; the terms are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the “men” and “women” is already inclusive of cisgender, **transgender** gender-diverse and intersex men and women and you do not need to specify that inclusion.

Q

Why can’t we use the term **gender non-conforming** to refer to gender identity?

A

The term gender non-conforming refers to **gender expression**. Individuals who are gender non-conforming have a gender expression that falls outside mainstream expectations associated with particular genders. Gender non-conforming people can have any gender identity, any sexual orientation and be either endosex or intersex. We should not assume that someone who is gender non-conforming has a diverse gender identity, just as we should not assume that someone with a diverse gender identity will be gender non-conforming.

Q

Why do we say **people with diverse SOGIESC** rather than diverse-SOGIESC people?

A

IOM uses both **person-first language** and identity-first language, depending on the context. Examples of person-first language are “persons with disabilities” and “persons with diverse SOGIESC.” Examples of identity-first language are “LGBTIQ+ people” and “older people.” When

referring to an individual, it is useful to ask them their language preference. When referring to a group, follow established IOM language.

Q

I want to **visually communicate** to our visitors that we have an inclusive workplace. How can I do so?

A

IOM has a wide range of diversity and SOGIESC-related **visual materials**, including posters, buttons, stickers, computer wallpapers and video call backgrounds, available on the IOM intranet page [*Diversity and Inclusion in IOM Programming*](#) under Visual Materials. These can be displayed in offices, waiting areas and on employee ID lanyards. Remember, however, that there will be a wide range of understanding of diverse SOGIESC in your locale, and that not everyone will be familiar with the terminology or with symbolism such as rainbow flags. To ensure you are transmitting the message to everyone who walks through our doors, consider video, spoken and written messaging that clearly states IOM's inclusive stance and preparedness to work with all migrants.