GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE TOOLKIT

Words matter. They can comfort, inspire, and transform us, or they can cause harm.

PSAC's *Gender Inclusive Language Toolkit* is designed to help members, elected leaders and staff interact using words that respect and celebrate our unique and diverse identities.

Using inclusive language helps people feel valued and welcomed within our union, the labour movement, and our communities. People should feel safe and supported regardless of their gender identity, and this toolkit outlines the small but tangible steps we can all take to be more inclusive.

Because language around gender, inclusion and identity is constantly evolving and changing, this toolkit will be reviewed regularly to ensure the terms and information remain up to date, respectful and inclusive.

*Bolded words throughout the toolkit are defined in the Glossary.

What's gender identity?

Gender identity refers to each person's individual experience with and connection to the concept of gender. A person's gender identity may be the same or different from the gender typically associated with their sex **assigned at birth**. A person can identify as a woman, man, both, as another gender altogether, as **gender fluid**, or they may have no gender. Some examples include **agender**, **cisgender**, **gender non-conforming**, **gender-queer**, **non-binary**, **transgender (also referred to as trans)**, and **Two-Spirit**.

Despite all the possible gender identities on the **gender spectrum**, our society operates within a **gender binary** where expectations of masculinity and femininity are placed on children from a very young age that dictate how they should act, present themselves, and navigate the world. These expectations follow us through our lives and can be constrictive and harmful for those who don't prescribe to these unnecessary rules.

It's important to note that just because someone may express themselves in a way that appears masculine or feminine, it doesn't necessarily reflect their actual gender identity. Never assume someone's gender identity based on appearance or behaviour.

What's gendered language?

Language is one of the most powerful tools we have, but it's often unnecessarily gendered in ways that centre masculinity. While there has been a shift away from some of these words — firefighter instead of fireman; chairperson instead of chairman — the work is far from done.

Gendered language can make trans, non-binary, and gender-fluid people feel invisible, and discredit their identities. That's why we need to challenge deeply entrenched habits and always consider the types of words we use when addressing each other.

What's gender inclusive language and why is it important?

Gender inclusive language is a way of communicating that strives to treat people of all genders and those with no gender with respect and dignity — with the goal of making everyone feel included. It's language that honours the fact that we all have unique lived experiences of gender. It consists of communicating with words or phrases without prejudice and discrimination.

Additionally, gender inclusive language looks to challenge gender stereotypes and the frequent assumptions that we make about people's identities, often based solely on appearance. By using gender inclusive language, we're not only showing that we value inclusion, but we're also promoting gender equity for all.

History of union greetings

You may have been to a union meeting or event and heard members refer to other members as "brothers" and "sisters." The use of these words within the labour context dates back to the 1800s when the act of meeting to discuss strategies for improving working conditions was criminalized. These expressions may also have some roots in union members' religious affiliations.

While the initial focus was on "brotherhoods" and "brothers," the term "sisters" was added to the lexicon in the 1960s, which demonstrates that even deeply entrenched labour terminology can change and adapt to be more inclusive.

While the intention of using these terms has always been to demonstrate solidarity and unity amongst union members, it can lead to **misgendering** at meetings or on the convention floor, which might discourage trans and gender diverse people from speaking. That's why it's important to never make assumptions about a person's gender identity.

Examples of inclusive language and greetings

Here are some examples of inclusive language you can use at meetings, events, conferences and in general communication. The language you use may need to shift depending on the audience you're addressing.

› Welcome, brothers, sisters, and *friends*!

› Hello, *folks*! (Or just Hello!)

› Greetings, *everyone*!

› *Colleagues*, it's time to work together!

› *Attention all participants*.

› *Delegate* at the mic, please state your point.

› What is the name of the *member* who just spoke?

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are words we use to reference someone without repeatedly using their name. The pronouns we use can also **express our gender** identity to others.

An individual can use one set of pronouns or multiple sets, which can include they/them/their, ze/hir/hirs, she/her/hers, and he/him/his, among many others.

When you're not sure what pronouns a person uses, use their name. You can't know for sure what pronouns someone uses just based on their appearance, behaviour or by hearing them speak. Avoiding assumptions by asking for a person's pronouns and correctly using them is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity and your commitment to inclusion.

Examples:

"Jo (they/them/their) is our new local president. They have been an activist for 10 years and their contributions have been invaluable."

"Mohammed (ze/hir/hirs) is a great writer and wrote that book hirself. Ze should be very proud."

"Ruby (she/her/hers) loves ice cream. She especially loves vanilla ice cream and so does her dog."
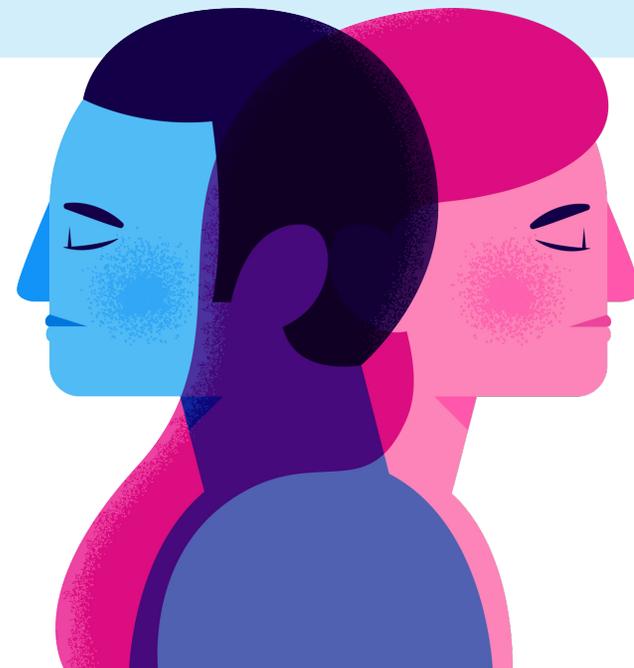
How do I ask someone what pronouns to use?

Asking people about their pronouns can seem invasive but confirming how a person wants to be referred to is an inclusive practice that demonstrates care and respect. Normalizing and increasing this practice will ensure that trans, Two-Spirit, and gender non-conforming people aren't singled out.

Start by sharing your own pronouns, which can encourage others to share theirs. For example:

"Hi. I'm Aaliyah, and I go by they/them pronouns."
"What's your name? And how should I refer to you?"
or "What pronouns do you use?"

Remember, not everyone wants to share their pronouns publicly. While it's always appropriate to invite people to share their pronouns, if someone doesn't share, don't force them. Trans, Two-Spirit and non-binary folks are vulnerable to harassment and discrimination and may choose not to share their identity with everyone. It's imperative never to **out** anyone and to respect their right to safety and privacy. If you encounter someone who doesn't want to share, it's always best to just use their name.

What is misgendering?

Misgendering can happen when someone makes assumptions about a person's gender identity, uses their **deadname**, and/or uses the wrong pronouns. Though misgendering may be unintentional, it can have harmful impacts. When someone is referred to with the wrong pronouns, it can make them feel stigmatized or excluded and signal that their gender and/or experiences aren't respected.

Unfortunately, for many people who are Two-Spirit, transgender, and/or non-binary, being misgendered is often a regular occurrence and can impact their mental health and ability to navigate their daily lives.

What if I notice someone else misgendering a person?

If someone is being misgendered, but isn't present to make the correction for themselves, it's important for others to hold the speaker accountable to foster and create inclusive environments. When someone misgenders another person, there are a few options:

› In a casual conversation, you can politely interject by saying "By the way, Taylor's pronouns are they/them."

› You can repeat back the sentence a person has just said using the correct pronouns.
Speaker 1: "I just met Sam; he seems really nice."
Speaker 2: "Yes, you're right, they are really great!"

If you encounter someone who continues to use the wrong pronouns or repeatedly misgenders someone, it may be time to change tactics. You can explain that this language and behaviour is unacceptable, harmful, and discriminatory. If you need further assistance, contact the anti-harassment coordinator for your event.

What if I make a mistake?

Mistakes will happen. Everyone makes mistakes from time to time. What's important is that we keep striving to do our best by being as inclusive as possible with our language.

If you misgender someone or use the wrong pronouns, acknowledge your mistake and move on. Don't dwell on it and don't make it about you. Apologizing and correcting yourself demonstrates care, respect and a commitment to equity.

For example, *"She is great writer. I'm sorry, I meant they are a great writer. Their last novel was phenomenal."*

On the next page, you'll find more tips for what to do if you misgender someone, adapted from materials by Awaken, an organization focused on empowering inclusive and authentic leaders and teams.
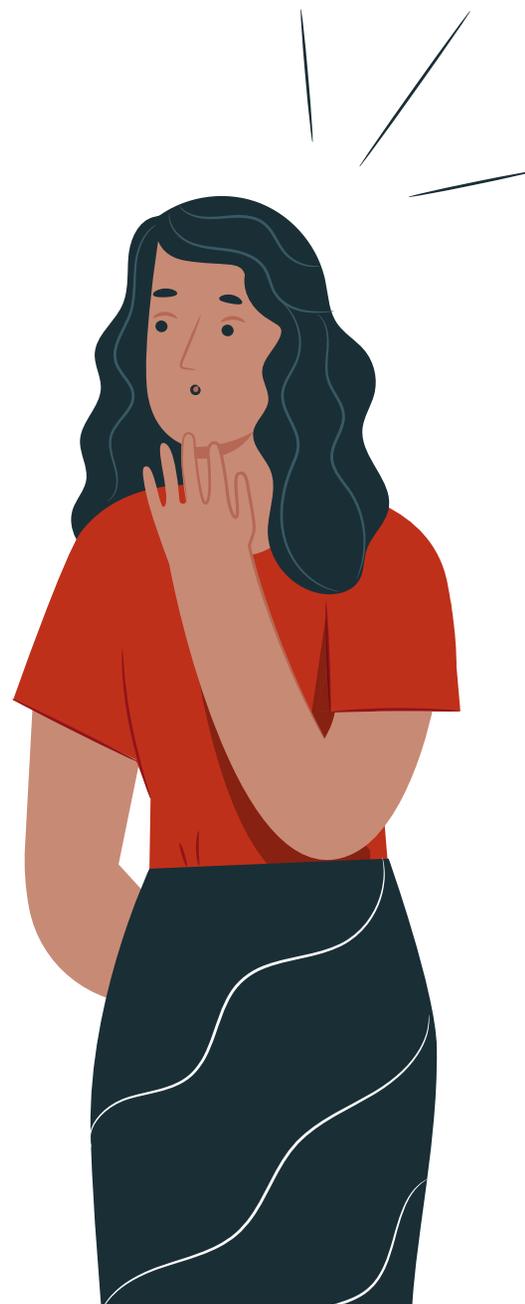
Strategies for when you misgender someone

Calm your defenses
- › Listen and practice self-management.
- › Breathe!

Apologize and acknowledge your mistake
- › Apologize without leading with your intention.
- › "I'm so sorry."
- › "Wow, I really messed that up — sorry!"

Express gratitude for correction (if applicable)
- › Thank them for the courage it took to correct you.
- › "Thank you so much for telling me."
- › "I really appreciate your feedback."

Commit to doing better, then do better!
- › Actions over promises!
- › Consider how you will work on this.
- › Practice!

Adapted from materials by Awaken.

What can I do to be affirming and inclusive of gender diverse communities?

› Introduce yourself with pronouns whenever you meet new people.

› Display your pronouns on email signatures, staff directories, social media profiles and during video calls.

› Challenge discriminatory language when you come across it.

› Don't force people to share their pronouns.

› Have tough conversations with family and friends about discrimination and gender inclusive language.

› Respect people's privacy and avoid asking invasive questions.

› Build your capacity to receive criticism because we all make mistakes.

› Keep on learning.

Additional resources

› [Video: Building Trans-Inclusive Workplaces: Bargain. Campaign. Educate.](#)

› [Guide: Gender Inclusive Washrooms in Your Workplace](#)

› [Video: Towards Inclusion](#)

Thank you

To you, the reader, for your interest in gender inclusive language, and for your commitment to building a more inclusive union.

To the 2018 PSAC National Triennial Convention delegates who adopted the "Gender Inclusive Terms" resolution that inspired this toolkit for taking steps to make our union a safer space for all members.

And to the members of the National Human Rights Committee **2SLGBTQIA+** Working Group for their advice and feedback throughout the development process.

Together, we can move towards a future where no one is left behind.

Glossary

› **2SLGBTQIA+** is an acronym that stands for Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The plus sign represents other sexual orientations, gender expressions, and romantic orientations that exist within queer communities.

› **Agender** refers to a person who doesn't identify with or experience any gender. Agender is different from non-binary because many non-binary people do experience gender.

› **Cisgender** refers to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their sex assigned at birth.

› **Deadnaming** occurs when an individual, intentionally or not, refers to the name that a transgender or gender diverse individual used at a different time in their life. This can cause trauma, stress, embarrassment, and even danger. Some may prefer the terms birth name, given name, or old name.

› **Gender binary** is the disproven concept that there are only two genders and that everyone must be one or the other. It is also often misused to assert that gender is biologically determined. This concept reinforces the idea that men and women are opposites and have different roles in society.

› **Gender expression** refers to how a person publicly presents their gender.

› **Gender-fluid** describes a person who doesn't consistently adhere to one fixed gender and who may move among genders.

› **Gender identity** refers to a person's individual experience of gender, which may be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

› **Gender non-conforming** is a term for those who don't follow societal and cultural expectations of binary gender roles. It's often an umbrella term for non-binary genders.

› **Gender queer** refers to individuals who blur preconceived boundaries of gender in relation to the gender binary.

› **Gender spectrum** is the concept that gender isn't just limited to a simple masculine/feminine binary model, but instead exists on a continuum.

› **Misgendering** is when someone makes assumptions about a person's gender identity, uses their deadname, and/or uses the wrong pronouns.

› **Non-binary** is any gender identity that doesn't fit within the masculine and feminine binary.

› **Outing** is the deliberate or accidental sharing of another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without their explicit consent. Outing is disrespectful and can present a danger for many 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals.

› **Sex assigned at birth** is the sex assigned to an infant at birth based on the child's visible sex organs/genitalia.

› **Transgender** or **Trans** is an umbrella term to describe a wide range of people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differ from the sex they were assigned at birth and/or the societal and cultural expectations of their assigned sex.

› **Two-Spirit** is a culturally-specific term used by some Indigenous people to indicate a person whose gender identity, spiritual identity and/or sexual orientation comprises both masculine and feminine spirits or neither.

*Definitions have been adapted from the PFLAG National Glossary of Terms and *Words Matter: Guidelines on Using Inclusive Language in the Workplace* from the Government of British Columbia.

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