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Nonbinary Genders

Nonbinary gender is a term for individuals who do not identify as female or male. In the United States, nonbinary people had been largely invisible in the dominant society and even in trans communities until the 21st century, but individuals who do not fit into a gender binary have been documented throughout history in many cultures. Most of the people in the United States identifying as nonbinary today are younger people, and as they become more visible, they are bringing about changes in language, laws, and popular culture, which is encouraging more young people to feel comfortable coming out as nonbinary and leading to even greater societal change.

The Histories of Nonbinary People

Although in Western societies a gender binary has been entrenched for centuries, other cultures have long histories of recognizing groups of individuals who do not identify as female or male or present themselves in traditionally feminine or masculine ways. These groups include *hijra* in India and Bangladesh, *meti* in Nepal, *khwaja sira* in Pakistan, *kathoey* in Thailand, *bakla* in the Philippines, and *travesti* in Brazil and other areas of South America. In North America, many Indigenous cultures prior to European colonization enabled individuals assigned male at birth and, to a lesser extent, individuals assigned female at birth to dress, work, and live, either partially or completely, as a different gender. The extent to which nonbinary individuals have been accepted in different non-Western societies has varied by culture and over time, but the level of inclusion and respect have been far greater than what has historically been the case in the dominant U.S. society.

Not until the early 2000s did nonbinary people in the United States begin to achieve visibility in both the larger society and the trans community, when members of Gen Z started to recognize themselves as nonbinary, developed terminology to describe their identities, and shared their experiences on various social media platforms, thereby helping even more nonbinary youth to understand themselves and come out. The result has been a sea change in how trans young people, especially youth assigned female at birth, identify themselves. Prior to the 2000s, almost all non-cis young people identified as trans women or trans men; today, studies show that 80%–90% of non-cis young people identify as nonbinary. However, upward of three-fourths of these individuals were female-assigned. Because of widespread transmisogyny and the lack of a community of others like themselves, many individuals assigned male at birth may feel reluctant to identify as nonbinary.

Nonbinary Gender Identities

Young nonbinary people today have created myriad terms to name themselves. While the use of *genderqueer* to refer to individuals who do not identify as female or male dates to the 1990s, most of the language to describe nonbinary gender identities (including the word *nonbinary* itself) has been developed in the 2000s, including the following terms:

Agender people: Individuals who identify as not having a specific gender.

Bigender people: Individuals who experience their gender identity as two genders at the same time or whose gender identity may vary between two genders.

Demigender people: Individuals who feel just a partial connection to a particular gender identity.

Genderfluid people: Individuals whose gender varies over time. A genderfluid person may, at any time, identify as male, female, genderless, or any nonbinary gender identity, or as some combination of gender identities.

Genderflux people: Individuals whose gender varies in intensity over time. A genderflux person may, at any time, identify as male, female, genderless, or any nonbinary gender identity, or as some combination of gender identities to varying degrees.

Transfeminine or transfem people: Individuals who were assigned male at birth who identify as feminine, but not necessarily as trans women.

Transmasculine or transmasc people: Individuals who were assigned female at birth who identify as masculine, but not necessarily as trans men.

It is important to note that while these are the most common nonbinary identities today, they are just some of the ways that nonbinary people name themselves. For example, in a 2022 study of the more than 1.22 million students who filled out the Common App, the admissions form used by more than 1,000 colleges, Genny Beemyn found that more than 3,500 students identified as other than female or male, and that these students described themselves in about 130 unique ways.

Pronouns

Along with developing new ways to name their genders, young nonbinary people are using a wide variety of

pronouns to refer to themselves. In the study of the students completing the Common App, Beemyn found that just over 3% (more than 36,800 students) indicated that they referred to themselves with pronouns beyond just “she/her” or “he/him.” These students used about 75 different *neopronouns* (pronouns beyond she, he, they, and it), resulting in their use of about 145 different pronoun sets. The most common neopronouns written-in were “xe/xem,” “ze/zir,” and “ze/hir.” The vast majority of the nonbinary students reported going by “they/them,” either as their only pronoun set or with “she/her” and/or “he/him.”

The Societal Impact of Nonbinary People

The growing number of young nonbinary people is having significant effects on language, laws, and popular culture. Because so many youth go by “they/them,” the singular “they/them” has gone from being rejected as inconvenient, grammatically incorrect, and politically polarizing to being widely embraced in less than a decade. Today, all online dictionaries and writing style guides indicate that using “they/them” to refer to an individual is acceptable language—recognizing that this usage can be traced back to at least the 14th century—and the news media largely respects the pronouns of individuals who go by “they/them,” with most no longer feeling the need to explain this usage to readers.

Another way that young nonbinary people are changing society is through the addition of a nonbinary gender marker option to legal documents. As of 2023, 22 states and Washington, DC, allow individuals to have an “X” on their driver’s licenses to indicate that they do not identify as female or male, and 16 states and Washington, DC, enable adults to change the gender marker on their birth certificates to an “X.” In addition, the Common App began allowing students to indicate their legal sex as “X or another legal sex” beyond female or male in 2023.

Discrimination and Harassment Against Nonbinary People and Its Negative Effects

At the same time that nonbinary people are increasingly visible in U.S. society, conservative-led states are responding to the growing number of trans and nonbinary young people by passing laws that discriminate against them and seek to limit their ability to express their identities. As of 2023, 21 states have banned trans students, specifically trans girls and women, from participating in sports consistent with their gender identity; 15 states have limited gender-affirming health care for trans youth; seven states have banned trans students

from using school facilities consistent with their gender identity; and five states encourage or require school staff to out trans students to their families. States are also proposing bills that would require school staff to address students by the pronouns they were assigned at birth. Even more states will undoubtedly enact anti-trans laws in the near future, because some conservative politicians believe that there is a political advantage in demonizing trans people.

The anti-trans hostility fomented by these “hate states” only adds to the negative climate often experienced by nonbinary young people. Research on nonbinary youth and young adults indicates that they regularly encounter discrimination because public bathrooms, locker rooms, and college campus housing are typically limited to female and male options. Even though Title IX and some state laws enable nonbinary people to use the gendered facilities that most align with their gender identity or expression, many feel extremely uncomfortable in gendered spaces, because they have experienced or fear experiencing harassment in these facilities. Nonbinary people also face harassment from individuals who refuse to respect the names and pronouns they go by. While misgendering is more commonly done mistakenly because people often make assumptions about someone’s gender based on stereotypical ideas about gender appearance, the effect on the misgendered individual is the same. Whether the misgendering is deliberate or inadvertent, the person is made to feel marginalized and invisible.

Because of the invalidation of their gender identities, nonbinary young people experience a high level of minority stress. As a result, they are at a greater risk for negative mental health outcomes than their binary trans counterparts, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other forms of psychological distress and a higher rate of suicide attempts. Given this disparity and the extent to which young trans people today are identifying as nonbinary, it is imperative that K–12 school and college administrators and teachers, therapists, and others who work with youth and young adults become familiar with nonbinary gender identities and how to support nonbinary people.

Whereas a negative environment can lead to negative mental outcomes for nonbinary young people, research by Stephanie Budge, Sergio Domínguez Jr., and Abbie Goldberg has found that the opposite can likewise be true: Nonbinary college students who indicate a greater feeling of belonging on campus and a more welcoming campus climate for nonbinary people also report a lower overall effect of experiences of minority stress. Other studies, most notably by Goldberg and Katherine Kivalanka and by Beemyn, have found that friends, especially nonbinary friends, are critical sources of support and gender-identity affirmation for nonbinary college students. This research suggests that even if nonbinary students do not feel a sense of belonging at their college in general, they can still avoid some of the negative mental health effects of harassment and discrimination by having a peer support system and a sense of belonging to a community of trans and nonbinary

people.

The Future Is Undeniably Nonbinary

Ultimately, trans and nonbinary people will face less systemic oppression because most younger cis people are strong supporters of trans rights, because they have friends and acquaintances who are out to them as trans or nonbinary. Moreover, even if a cis youth does not personally know someone who has told them that they are trans or nonbinary, there are a growing number of trans and nonbinary younger people in popular culture. Prior to 2017, when Asia Kate Dillon played a nonbinary character on TV and came out as nonbinary themselves, there were not any openly nonbinary people in popular culture. Today, there are many nonbinary actors and musicians, including Shamir, Demi Lovato, Indya Moore, Emma Corrin, Sam Smith, Janelle Monáe, and Sara Ramirez. The emergence of nonbinary celebrities reflects the growing number of younger people identifying as nonbinary and, at the same time, helps to create a cultural space that makes it possible for more nonbinary young people to recognize themselves as nonbinary and come out.

The number of trans youth, especially nonbinary young people, will almost certainly continue to increase, as nonbinary people become more visible and gain greater acceptance in society, so that nonbinary youth have a wider range of images and role models and have less fear of experiencing negative consequences if they come out. The growing number of young trans people, in turn, will undoubtedly result in the further proliferation of gender labels and pronouns, as members of Gen Z and Gen Alpha create more and more nuanced terms to describe how their gender differs from that of their peers and from the gender identities of previous generations. Hopefully, with more and more trans and nonbinary young people coming out and educating others, they will be embraced for who they are, no matter how they name their gender or what pronouns they use.

See also [Gender Binaries](#); [Gender Identity Labels](#); [Genderqueer](#); [Minority Stress](#); [Nonbinary Pronouns](#); [Trans Identities](#)

Further Readings

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