

PAS QUICKNOTES

Gender-Inclusive Language

Planning processes and outcomes create opportunities for people to feel respected, valued, and included. Inclusive planning starts with gender-inclusive language. Using gender-inclusive language helps planning accurately and respectfully reflect everyone.

It wasn't that long ago that masculine words were considered professional and proper—from "to each his own" to "history." But when using gendered language, people tend to unconsciously uphold gender stereotypes. To counter this, gender-neutral terms such as "chair" or "committee member" have become common, yet these practices are not universal. Gender-inclusive language is broader still. It acknowledges that gender expression is a continuum and that the binary of "she" and "he" does not apply to everyone.

Planners have an ethical and professional responsibility to advance equity and inclusion. Gender-inclusive language represents an opportunity to integrate equity and inclusion into planning practice. Ensuring people are included does not mean others are excluded. On the contrary, gender-inclusive language is a deeply empowering action extending beyond gender.

BACKGROUND

The concepts of gender and sex are used interchangeably despite their different meanings. *Gender* is rooted in social structures, and refers to roles, behaviors, and expectations a society deems appropriate for girls and boys and women and men. *Sex*, on the other hand, is a label assigned at birth based on biological attributes. A person's gender can be different from their sex assigned at birth. Gender exists on a spectrum that includes, but is not limited to, the binary categorization of "she" and "he."

Gender diversity is the extent to which people's gender identity, role, or expression differs from social and cultural norms prescribed for an assigned sex. *Cisgender* (as contrasted with *transgender*) refers to people whose sex assigned at birth, bodies, and gender identity match. But others may express a gender identity that does not fit into the socially constructed norms for the sex assigned at birth. They may instead identify as gender-fluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, or transgender. Some may use "she/her" or "he/him," but others may use "they/them" or other gender-neutral pronouns.

According to Merriam-Webster, "they" is used to refer to a single person whose gender is intentionally not revealed or whose gender identity is non-binary." Although "they" is singular and refers to an individual, the verb is conjugated the same as with the plural "they" (e.g., "they are"). "Ze/zir" is another example of a gender-neutral pronoun.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Planners' ethical obligation to build diverse and inclusive systems and communities means updating professional language to explicitly include people of all genders. Changing language is an easy—and visible—way the profession can be inclusive. Without it, planning upholds unconscious bias. By committing to gender-inclusive language, planners start to dismantle biases.

Using gender-inclusive language means communicating in ways that do not specify any particular gender identity and do not perpetuate gender stereotypes. Using neutral job titles (e.g., "chair" instead of "chairman") and gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., "they" instead of "s/he") are examples of language that includes people along the gender spectrum.

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"Acceptance Street" at the intersection of Christopher and Gay Streets in New York City. Image by NYC DOT.



American Planning Association
Planning Advisory Service

Creating Great Communities for All

Using gender-inclusive language demonstrates that planners, officials, and the public agencies they represent are intentional about engaging everybody in planning processes and outcomes. Because of the outsized impact planners and planning processes have on community outcomes, it is important to adopt inclusive practice: when people feel included, they are more likely to engage.

GENDER-INCLUSIVE PLANNING EXAMPLES

Local governments are changing language to be inclusive of gender within planning and beyond. The city of Berkeley, California, updated its municipal code to be gender neutral by removing gendered pronouns. Instances of gendered terms were changed to specific nouns like “architect,” “attorney,” and “councilmember.” In its Equity Through Access project, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission used the gender-neutral pronoun “they” in stories describing how a fictional resident, “Pat,” used transit to commute. In Canada, the city of Toronto featured a transgender youth avatar in its downtown plan *TOCore* as one of 16 personas used to explain how people might relate to downtown Toronto.

Cities and states throughout the United States now offer a third gender option on identification and birth certificates, allowing residents to choose between M for male, F for female, or X for those who do not identify as male or female. Having identification that accurately reflects one’s identity promotes inclusion and may minimize discrimination.

OTHER GENDER-INCLUSIVE ACTIONS

There are many easy actions planners and others can take to support gender inclusivity. These include adding pronouns to email signatures and normalizing the sharing of pronouns during introductions; avoiding gendered courtesy titles in favor of neutral ones, such as “Chair”; including gender-inclusive options on documents, forms, surveys, and event registrations; updating job descriptions to be gender neutral or gender inclusive; and disaggregating data by gender beyond the binary to understand experiences for all genders to aid in decision making.

BEING AN ALLY

Planners can influence decisions as allies creating spaces where all people feel welcome. Being an ally means acting to support members of a group with which you do not identify. Inclusivity requires intention, consistency, and respect. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Learn and be open.** Language evolves and changes. New information, concepts, and people can challenge personal perspectives. Be willing to learn about people’s lived experiences.
- **Focus on people.** Refer to characteristics such as gender, age, and race only when necessary to do so. There is often no need to differentiate.
- **Ask when in doubt.** You won’t have all the answers. When someone shares their pronouns with you, make an effort to use them correctly.
- **Stay calm.** Mistakes will happen. Keep in mind this is about the feelings of the person that has been harmed. Don’t make a big scene; accept the correction, refer to the person correctly, and move on.
- **Practice.** Changing language and challenging unconscious bias can be uncomfortable. Leaning into discomfort can help support inclusivity through humility and empathy.

CONCLUSIONS

Gender-inclusive language is a central component to gender-inclusive planning, and the first step to honoring the breadth of gender-related community experience and potential in planning practice. Planners have an ethical obligation and, further, a moral imperative to build diverse and inclusive systems and communities. Language communicates values and can lead to action in support of those values. Gender-inclusive language allows planners to practice values of adaptability, problem solving, engagement, and inclusion. When planning leads with inclusive language, our communities become more inclusive for all.

PAS QuickNotes (ISSN 2169-1940) is a publication of the American Planning Association’s Planning Advisory Service (PAS). Visit PAS online at planning.org/pas to find out how PAS can work for you. Joel Albizo, FASAE, CAE, Chief Executive Officer; Petra Hurtado, PhD, Research Director; Ann Dilleuth, AICP, Editor. © 2020 American Planning Association, which has offices at 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601-5927, and 1030 15th St., NW, Suite 750 West, Washington, DC 20005-1503; planning.org. All rights reserved. APA permits the reproduction and distribution of PAS QuickNotes to educate and inform public officials, engaged citizens, and others about important planning-related topics.

FURTHER READING

Published by the American Planning Association

Khanna, Meghna, AICP. 2020. “Mind the Gender Gap.” *Planning*, February. bit.ly/2GEjsBm.

Peña, Johamary. 2020. “Gender Mainstreaming.” *PAS QuickNotes 84*. Chicago: American Planning Association. bit.ly/2Flo92x.

Other Resources

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Sakurai, Shige. n.d. “Pronouns Matter.” *mypronouns.org*. bit.ly/32bDThn.