

# A QUESTION OF GENDER

Gender classification in  
international research

January 2024

---

**AUTHOR**

**Trixie Cartwright**

**IPSOS  
VIEWS  
ESG SERIES**

**GAME CHANGERS**





Younger generations today are growing up in a time of increasing recognition and acceptance of diverse gender identities and are more open to non-binary and fluid genders. ”

Given the growing recognition of the diversity of gender identities, there is a need for guidance on how to ask people about their gender in an inclusive way, especially when conducting international research. Consideration needs to be given to how easy it will be to translate the question across different countries and cultures, as well as how the question will be received by the respondent and whether they are being

interviewed by someone or completing the question themselves.

The terms "sex" and "gender" are often used interchangeably and are not always distinguished even in legal documents. Although connected, the terms are not equivalent and for those who have a gender or lived experience that does not align with their sex registered at birth, this distinction is very important.

## THE NON-BINARY POPULATION – DATA AND INSIGHTS

There is limited data on the non-binary population (those who do not consider themselves part of the traditionally viewed gender binary of male or female), with more data available on sex (generally binary sex) although on some occasions it may include intersex.

Very few census questionnaires or official data sources have included questions that distinguish between sex and gender and, when included, there hasn't been a consistent approach across countries. Where there is data, it clearly shows a higher prevalence of those who don't identify as male or female among the younger age groups.

The 2021 census in England and Wales found that 1% of people aged 16 to 24 stated that their gender identity was different from their sex registered at birth, compared with 0.5% of the overall population.<sup>1</sup>

The 2021 Canadian census showed that one in 300 Canadians aged 15 and older identified as either transgender or non-binary, with more than 62% of those being under the age of 35. One in 100 young adults aged 20-24 identified as either transgender or non-binary.<sup>2</sup>

In a study<sup>3</sup> of 22,514 online adults aged 16-74, conducted by Ipsos in March 2023 across 30 countries, a global average of 1% describe



themselves as transgender, 1% as non-binary, gender non-conforming, or gender fluid, and 1% as neither, but differently from male or female. There are variations by country and generations when describing themselves as any of these, ranging from:

- 1% in countries including Argentina, Hungary, Peru, and Portugal, to 5% in Thailand and 6% in Switzerland.

- 6% of Gen Z and 3% of Millennials, compared to 1% of both Gen X and Boomers.

Younger generations today are growing up in a time of increasing recognition and acceptance of diverse gender identities and are more open to non-binary and fluid genders. This openness affects how they see and understand their own and others' genders. This emphasises the importance of including non-binary individuals in research to address their specific needs and experiences.

## INTERNATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to consider cultural nuances when asking about gender, as the legal and social implications can vary across different countries and cultures, and the terminology used and understood may differ.

In recent decades the language of non-binary has become increasingly prevalent within English speaking cultures, but the concept of another gender has existed for centuries, with some countries having traditional third genders deeply rooted in their history and culture. Examples include the hijras in India, two-spirit people in Native American culture, the muxe in Mexico and the bakla in the Philippines. Although considered a third gender, these individuals may not identify as non-binary or transgender.

For those who do not identify as male or female, it is possible in some countries or cultures that claiming this may be considered culturally unacceptable, cause research

participants to feel unsafe or even have legal implications. In such societies there is likely to be less familiarity with non-binary gender terminology and lower acceptance. Even in more accepting countries there are still pockets of communities that are less accepting, perhaps influenced by their experiences, age and culture. Methodology may also impact acceptance, potentially with more acceptance when answering a survey online than in interviewer-led surveys.

ESOMAR recently released a report<sup>4</sup> in collaboration with industry associations that provides guidance on where a basic non-binary gender question can be asked. While it is anticipated that the number of countries where the non-binary question can be asked will grow, it is possible that some countries may become less accepting in the future due to local regime changes or laws making it unsafe or unacceptable to ask, therefore local knowledge should be sought.



## SOME DEFINITIONS:

### SEX

Assigned to a person based on primary sex characteristics (genitalia) and reproductive functions. Sex is usually assigned and registered at birth and the categories are typically binary – male or female and, in some cases, may include intersex.

### INTERSEX

A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female.

### GENDER

Often expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity, gender is largely culturally determined and is often assumed from the sex assigned at birth.

### GENDER IDENTITY

A person's innate sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

### CISGENDER

Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

### TRANS/TRANSGENDER

An umbrella term used to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.

### NON-BINARY

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not sit comfortably with male or female or man or woman.

### LGBTQ+

An acronym and abbreviation used to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning. The “+” represents those who are part of the community, but for whom LGBTQ does not accurately capture or reflect their identity.

## ASKING THE QUESTION

There are multiple ways of phrasing questions about gender in research and there is a need to balance simplicity, understanding and inclusivity. It is recommended that the simple and familiar “Are you...?” question format is used for basic research needs.

Traditionally within market research, sex and gender questions have mostly followed this “Are you...?” format with the binary answer options of male and female, without clarification of whether the question related to sex or gender. This wording is simple and may be less confusing to some participants who are accustomed to this question. However, “Are you...?” could be considered vague and open to confusion, especially to those who are not cisgender, as it is open to interpretation if the question is asking about their gender or the sex they were assigned at birth. This could be made clear from the answer options, however if they do not provide sufficient clarity, a further instruction indicating that the question refers to gender could be included. This could be a rollover of a word or phrase on an online study and a note or instruction for other modes.

Feedback from the LGBTQ+ community stated that “describe” may be considered jarring or loaded as gender is considered an identity rather than a description. ”

Another option is, “Which of the following describes how you think of yourself?”. This question clearly indicates that the respondent is being asked to self-identify, but internal research by Ipsos found that feedback from the LGBTQ+ community stated that “describe” may be considered jarring or loaded as gender is considered an identity rather than a description. For these reasons it is considered better to discount questions using describe, and it is acknowledged that “best describes” could be useful to consider in a question text if extensive answer options are included and a single code is required.

“What is your gender identity?” is a clear question and was well received by members of the LGBTQ+ community. “What is your gender?” was slightly more popular, although not as preferred as “Are you...?”. Having a clearer question such as “What is your gender?” could be particularly useful should there be a series of questions including, for example, sex and gender, for studies specifically researching the LGBTQ+ community, or if the answer options do not make it sufficiently clear that the question is about gender. It should be noted that in some countries the concept of gender may not be easily understood or translatable, so there may be a need for a more detailed explanation or for a local word that is more fitting.





## GENDER RESPONSE OPTIONS

In order to be inclusive of those who do not identify on the gender binary, it is recommended that an additional response option of “Another gender” be added to the existing options of male and female. This option is inclusive and translatable, and it can also accommodate newly recognised genders as well as historic third genders deeply rooted into some cultures.

There are a number of considerations to take into account when looking at amending the standard binary response options of male and female to include non-binary respondents.

Before considering the expansion of the answer options to cover other genders, it is worth considering the order of the responses. In most English language surveys (and legal forms for that matter) the answer list order when asking gender or sex is often male first, followed by female. Conventionally, many fixed list questions are listed alphabetically, however in the case of gender and sex it is the reverse, potentially

stemming from historical gender biases. There is an argument for the female option to come before male, although a more equitable solution would be for the options of male and female to be randomised.

In natural language, at least in English, man/male, and woman/female are often used interchangeably both in everyday life and in law. Increasingly there are more distinctions, especially among the LGBTQ+ community, that man/woman is used to refer to gender while male/female is used to refer to sex, yet this is not a consistently held view. Using man and woman as the options, instead of male and female, can complicate asking about gender across different age groups as they are not age-neutral words. Young adults and teenagers may not identify as a man or woman and may instead choose an “other” option if the choices of boy or girl are not provided, perhaps causing some distortion in the results.

Keeping with male and female as the two options remains consistent with what has been asked for years and removes the need to consider adjusting the question wording by age. Despite some countries introducing a gender question to their census, there hasn't been a shift away from the male/female terminology. It should be noted that the use of male/female or man/woman is not consistent across languages. For example, in Spanish "hombre"/"mujer" is often used as the translation of male/female.

Adapting the response options to man/woman when asking gender in some English-speaking countries (and perhaps in other languages) may be introduced as the discussions and terminology continue to evolve. Consulting local industry associations and statistical agencies could offer insights, and further research into the potential impact on responses, particularly from younger generations, is advised.

Beyond the binary options of male and female there are numerous other terms for gender (including genderqueer, pangender, polygender, neutrois, gender non-conforming, genderfluid,

gender variant, two-spirit person, non-binary, transgender female, transgender male, intersex, bi-gender and a-gender). For most research this level of detail is not required, and the aim has been to keep the overall question closed and as short and simple as possible, while remaining inclusive.

Having reviewed various third option alternatives, the key points supporting the use of "Another gender" are:

- Keeping gender in the answer response allows for additional clarity, even if the question doesn't specifically refer to gender (for example using "Are you...?")
- The terminology is inclusive and translatable. As language evolves, this answer option is likely to continue to be relevant for newly acknowledged genders and for cultures with a history of third genders.
- This answer option works well for self-completion and for interviewer-led surveys.

Using man and woman as the options, instead of male and female, can complicate asking about gender across different age groups as they are not age-neutral words. ”

# RECOMMENDED QUESTION FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 shows example questions that could be used when collecting basic demographics depending on the acceptability of non-binary gender among the target audience. This is in line with ESOMAR in their *Gender - Best practice recommendations for multi-country work*<sup>6</sup>.

A non-binary question suitable for most basic research needs in most countries and cultures is shown in column 1 of the table. In countries and cultures where identifying as non-binary may not be considered safe or acceptable, offering the binary question as optional, or adding “prefer not to answer” could be an initial step, as shown in column 2.

In countries or cultures where there is high acceptance and well-known terminology in this area, and where the research demands a deeper understanding of gender, researchers may


choose to incorporate more detailed questions in their survey. Answer options such as “non-binary”, “none” or “no gender” could potentially be added. However, when adding in numerous options, care should be taken to ensure that the question doesn’t cause any non-response, perhaps positioning it later in the survey. It is also important to check whether the question still works effectively, for instance if an option such as “transgender” is included, the question may need to be adjusted to account for the possibility of a respondent identifying with multiple answer options.

Data privacy regulations, such as the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), should also be taken into account. Explicit informed consent may be necessary, especially when introducing detailed or open-ended response options that could potentially indicate a medical procedure.

Figure 1: Recommended question framework

01

## Basic non-binary question


 Can be used where non-binary is accepted

### Are you

- Female
- Male
- Another gender
- Prefer not to answer

02

## Basic binary question

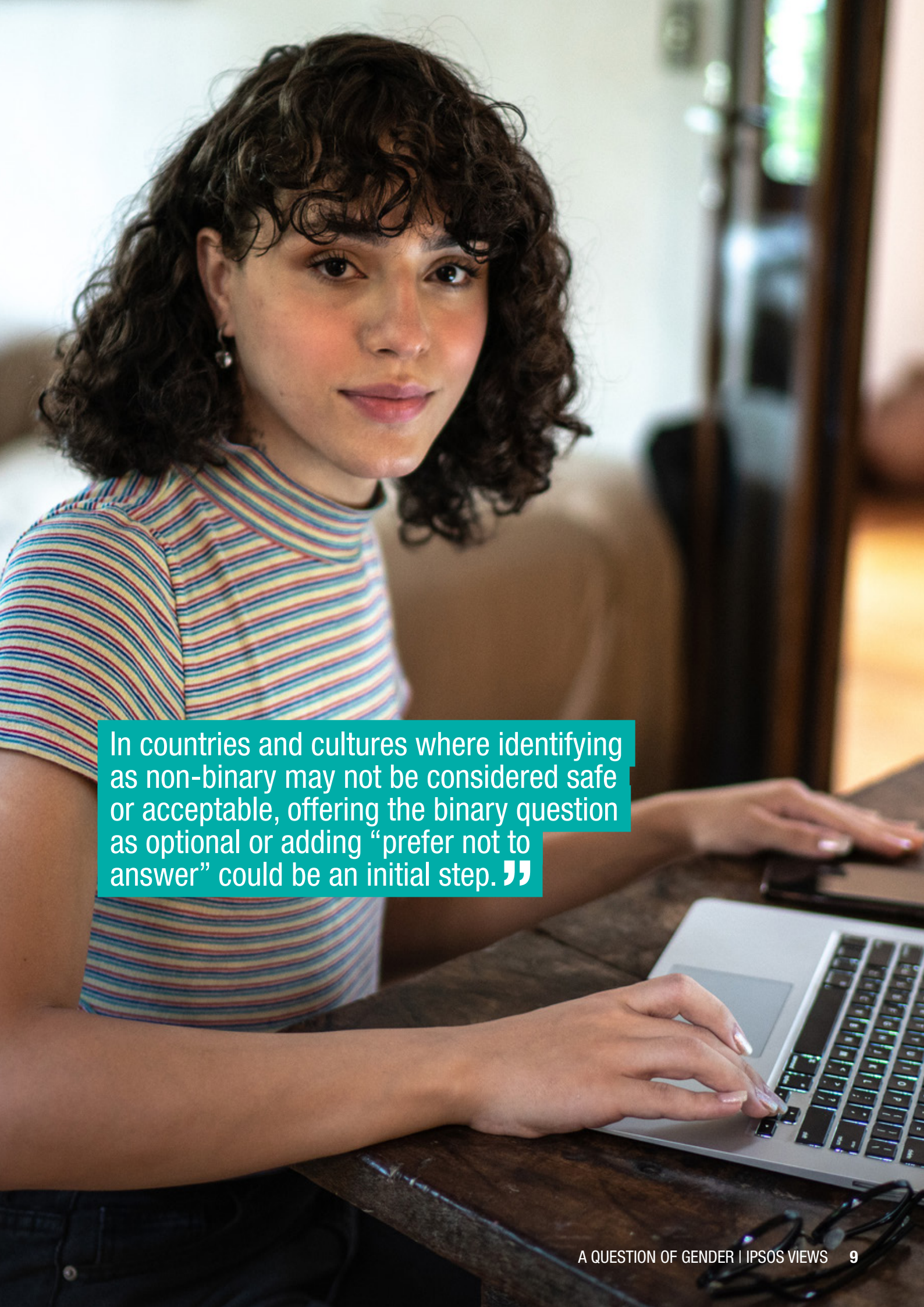
 Can be used where non-binary is not accepted or safe

### Are you

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to answer

Source: Ipsos





In countries and cultures where identifying as non-binary may not be considered safe or acceptable, offering the binary question as optional or adding “prefer not to answer” could be an initial step. ”





## INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

When asking children non-binary gender questions, researchers should carefully consider the child's age and their cultural context and offer sensitive and appropriate response options to ensure comfort and respect for the child's developing sense of self. It is recommended that local guidance be sought to help formulate questions and determine whether the question should be directed to the child or young person or to a responsible adult (parents, guardians, grandparents or teachers).

There is discussion about the appropriate age to ask a child a non-binary gender question and whether a responsible adult giving consent for a child to take part in research would be comfortable with such questions. There is no clear guidance from the industry on this, although this guidance has been discussed with the Market Research Society standards team (the first industry body to release guidance on asking non-binary gender for general research

purposes). Multiple factors may make the parent or child more or less comfortable or accepting of a non-binary gender question, including their exposure, whether positive or negative, and familiarity or teachings about the topic. This could be through television, social media, family, friends, school, culture, religion etc.

When asking a responsible adult about a child's gender, options of "unknown" or "undecided" could be included as well as "another gender", acknowledging those who prefer their child to decide their own gender.

For young children, male and female could be replaced with boy and girl and, as the terminology of "another gender" may not be understood by all, simpler alternatives such as "other", "neither a boy or a girl", "something else" and/or "not sure" or "don't know" could be offered, while ensuring the question remains optional with a "prefer not to answer" option.

Interestingly children may feel more at ease with these questions, perhaps more so than their parents – some of whom may hold strong views. Recent articles have shown a negative response to children being asked about their gender identity from the age of 7 in schools in the UK.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, in the US, the state of Florida recently banned teaching about gender identity (as well as sexual orientation) to children up to the age of 18 in their schools.<sup>7</sup>

In cases where gender questions have been included in a census, they have typically been directed at those over 15 or 16 years old. This could serve as an indicator, however there may be a desire or requirement to ask this of younger children or in countries where this is not included on the census. ESOMAR<sup>8</sup> guidelines define a child as being 12 and under and a “young person” as aged 13-17, but these age definitions vary substantially and are determined by national laws and codes. Local guidelines from industry associations or other reliable sources, such as health, education (aligning

with secondary school age), film age rating systems or social media platforms (Facebook and TikTok having a minimum age of 13), should be consulted.

When talking to children, it is important to provide clear information about what will be asked, especially when it is deemed sensitive by the responsible adult providing consent as, ultimately, they can decide whether they feel a non-binary gender question is appropriate. It is also important to consider if the information is required for the research. For example, understanding a child’s self-identified gender could be significant in some studies, such as those on mental health, inclusion or bullying. Parents may be comfortable with this being asked to younger children for these purposes, and perhaps may prefer it if the research was carried out in a supervised group setting, like a classroom. For some research, an answer provided by the parent or responsible adult might be sufficient, even if the child may have answered differently.

**There is discussion about the appropriate age to ask a child a non-binary gender question and whether a responsible adult giving consent for a child to take part in research would be comfortable with such questions.”**





## INTERVIEWER-LED SURVEYS

Interviewers may have been trained to code gender based on observation, however it is important that respondents self-identify their gender, avoiding assumptions based on appearance or voice. In some cultures or countries this may not be so easily implemented, so local guidance should be sought. Explaining the reasons behind asking a potentially sensitive

question, such as the importance of respect and inclusivity, may also be beneficial.

Some participants may be less comfortable about disclosing their gender or expressing it to another person so it's possible that self-completion, whilst providing more anonymity, may also provide more comfort and accuracy.

## INCLUSIVITY FROM SURVEY DESIGN TO REPORTING

Non-binary groups should be included in the sample and the routing of surveys and should not be mistakenly screened out on gender. Researchers should avoid making assumptions that could lead to the exclusion of potential respondents, particularly in studies involving products or categories typically targeted to one sex or gender. For example, a study about pregnancy or pregnancy-related products may

be relevant to respondents who don't identify as female. It is also important to be mindful of gendered language and avoid unconscious bias by using neutral and inclusive language within the survey and in subsequent reporting. For example, in an education focused study, use gender neutral terms like headteacher rather than headmaster or headmistress. For international research, attention should also



Non-binary groups should be included in the sample and the routing of surveys and not be mistakenly screened out on gender. ”

be given to ensuring inclusivity in the language used in translations.

All non-binary participants that qualify for a research survey should be included within the data set. Until there are official or robust statistics on the proportions of people in the

population that don't identify as either male or female, there is a challenge for researchers to know how to weight this population. It is recommended that non-binary groups are given a weight of 1 for gender unless there is a robust data source available from the country to indicate otherwise.

## RESEARCH REQUIRING FURTHER INFORMATION

For certain areas of research, more detailed information could be required, and researchers may need to ask a more detailed question or set of questions requiring data privacy opt-ins. As an example, when conducting a medical or mental health study about the LGBTQ+ community there may be a need to capture self-described biological sex, more detailed gender descriptions and sexual orientation, along with age and other demographics. It may be necessary to ask a question to confirm whether their gender is the same as the sex registered at their birth, or directly ask whether

they are transgender or have a trans history. Other potential questions could include asking about their preferred pronouns or their gender expression.

When requiring information about someone's physical attributes, it may be simpler to ask directly about that, providing some context and explanation as to why the information is needed. For example, for a study about ovarian cancer there could be a question specifically asking if the respondent has ovaries.



## CONCLUSION

The proposed basic question framework is suitable for both self-completion and interviewer-led surveys and can be used as is or customised further to meet requirements for specific research objectives, countries, cultures or target groups.

The concept of gender is rapidly developing. In more accepting countries, and in some subsets of the population, it is likely to evolve more quickly, for example among the LGBTQ+ community and the younger generation who have grown up with an understanding of non-binary gender and gender fluidity in their lives.

It is likely that the way gender is perceived will continually change and that the number of genders will increase with pluralistic gender becoming more common. In the coming years gender questions are likely to evolve, although it's not clear what the options will be or if they will be cross-culturally relevant. Periodic research will help to show how it is evolving and when questions may need reviewing. Inclusivity should be the priority wherever it does not compromise the safety of the participant or the integrity of the research. Respondents are core to research, and it is important to ensure that there are appropriate and dignified response options for all.

**Inclusivity should be the priority wherever it does not compromise the safety of the participant or the integrity of the research. ”**



## REFERENCES

This perspective is predominantly based on the paper referenced immediately below, with some updates and additional references.

### PRIMARY REFERENCE

A Question of Gender: Gender classification in international research, by Trixie Cartwright, Ipsos, London, UK and Clive Nancarrow, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. *International Journal of Market Research*. 2022, Vol. 64(5) 575–593. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14707853221108663>

### ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

1. England and Wales Census (2023) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/census2021dictionary/variablesbytopic/sexualorientationandgenderidentityvariables/census2021/genderidentity>
2. The Globe and Mail (2022) <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-canada-age-of-population-demographics-census/>
3. Ipsos. LGBT+ Pride (2023) <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-05/ipsos%20LGBT%2B%20Pride%202023%20Global%20Survey%20Report%20-%20rev.pdf>
4. ESOMAR. “Where can a question about non-binary gender be asked?” (2023) <https://esomar.org/uploads/attachments/clemscahu2ntmrz3v4a2hdlza-demographics-best-practice-recommendation-gender-list-of-countries.pdf>
5. ESOMAR. Gender – Best practice recommendations for multi-country work (2023) <https://esomar.org/uploads/attachments/clemsb2gt2kuors3vr33zu6og-demographics-best-practice-recommendation-gender.pdf>
6. The Daily Mail (2023) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11656145/Nicola-Sturgeons-SNP-plans-ask-children-male-female-transgender-survey.html>
7. Reuters (2023) <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/florida-moves-expand-ban-sexual-orientation-gender-identity-teaching-2023-03-22/>
8. ESOMAR/GRBN. Guideline on Research and Data Analytics with Children, Young People and Other Vulnerable Individuals (2018) <https://esomar.org/code-and-guidelines/guideline-on-research-and-data-analytics-with-children-young-people-and-other-vulnerable-individuals>

# A QUESTION OF GENDER

Gender classification in international research

---

## AUTHOR

**Trixie Cartwright**, Global Lead, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Ipsos

The **Ipsos Views** white papers are produced by the **Ipsos Knowledge Centre**.

[www.ipsos.com](http://www.ipsos.com)  
[@ipsos](https://www.instagram.com/ipsos)

**GAME CHANGERS**

