

2021

MEDIA STYLE GUIDE

A tool for journalists reporting on issues related to sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and women's rights



womensliberationfront.org

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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has brought a whirlwind of social change to journalism. While, in many cases, these changes have helped the profession more accurately represent a diverse range of views of experiences, in some cases well-meaning journalists and publications have traded accuracy and ethics to appease a small minority of extremists. This is most obvious in the modern reporting practices around sex and gender, sexual orientation, and women's rights.

The Ethical Journalism Network outlines five major principles for ethical journalism¹:

1. Truth and Accuracy
2. Independence
3. Fairness and Impartiality
4. Humanity
5. Accountability

The Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ) further elaborates in their code of ethics² that journalists should:

“– Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.”

“– Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.”

“– Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information. Clearly label illustrations and re-enactments.”

The ethics are at risk in journalism, even by the same societies and publications that promote these guidelines. Take, for example, the Trans Journalists Association's Style

¹<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are/5-principles-of-journalism>

²<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

Guide³, which is promoted by the SPJ⁴. This style guide specifically asks journalists not to use the legal names or reference the sex of subjects/sources in certain conditions (in contradiction to the ethical obligation to provide truth, accuracy, and context); demands that journalists “avoiding giving a platform to” certain groups who oppose their ideology such as “so-called gender critical feminists” and “transmedicalists/truscum” (in contradiction to the ethical obligation for fairness, impartiality, and supporting the open and civil exchange of views); and limits the ability of journalists to report on certain experiences, such as those of detransitioners (in contradiction to the ethical obligation to remain independent).

The widespread acceptance of such standards despite the obvious ethical concerns has been done in the name of the fourth ethical journalism principle: “Humanity,” which the SPA describes as:

“Journalists should do no harm. What we publish or broadcast may be hurtful, but we should be aware of the impact of our words and images on the lives of others.”

In reality, though, the change in how these issues are reported on by the press has largely been driven by an online culture of fear. Journalists who fairly report on these issues are met with abuse and harassment, and in some cases, are even fired for doing their job. Newsrooms and editorial staff are being bullied by a small minority of online activists into a position that is not even supported by the majority of American voters⁵. Journalists do themselves and the public a disservice by allowing their work to be controlled by extremists on any side of the debate.

By caving to the unethical demands of organizations like the Trans Journalists Association, publications are also (perhaps unwittingly) engaging in the process of erasing the global crisis of misogyny. Inaccurate information misrepresenting the sex of individuals in reporting is hiding the reality of male violence, distorting public perception with misinformation, and confusing the conversation on sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

³<https://transjournalists.org/style-guide/>

⁴<https://www.spj.org/news.asp?REF=1763>

⁵<https://www.womensliberationfront.org/news/national-poll-support-for-womens-spaces>

Take, for example, this story⁶ from February 27, 2020 published by 10 WBNS and repeated in a variety of other outlets. The headline reads:

“Texas woman punched, squeezed 1-year-old girl to death out of frustration, affidavit says”

The lede states, “A Rockdale woman facing a capital murder charge for the death of a 20-month-old girl admitted to police she punched and squeezed the child out of anger and frustration, according to a probable cause affidavit from Rockdale police.” Although the article does mention the babysitter’s legal name, it never clarifies that this crime was actually committed by a man. This reporting is intentionally sensationalist given that the overwhelming majority of murders are committed by men (89.5 percent) according to the U.S. Department of Justice⁷, a pattern which even holds true when the victim is under the age of five (63 percent male perpetrators). Correctly reporting the sex of perpetrators and victims of violent crime is especially important for the public to have an accurate understanding of who violent criminals are and what risks are posed by and to certain populations. This is just one example of how unethical reporting, as advocated for by the Trans Journalists Association and promoted by the Society of Professional Journalists, causes harm to the public.

In this style guide, we provide a more accurate way to report on the issues of sex and gender, sexual orientation, and women’s rights. The guidelines outlined below reflect an accurate scientific understanding of these concepts, informed by a feminist perspective, while adhering to the strictest principles of journalism ethics including truth and accuracy, fairness and impartiality, and humanity.

⁶ <https://www.10tv.com/article/news/nation-world/texas-woman-punched-squeezed-1-year-old-girl-death-out-frustration-affidavit-says-2020-feb/530-5cf316e8-fe17-462f-b301-53da53099eb7>

⁷ <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>

SECTION 1: DEFINITION OF TERMS

These definitions represent the common use of the word specifically in reference to reporting on issues of sex and gender, sexual orientation, and women's rights. Some words may have alternate definitions for use in other realms. In most cases, we try to use an official dictionary definition. However, in some cases, especially when the dictionaries themselves have caved to the same pressures as outlined above⁸, we have corrected some definitions for accuracy. We prioritize American English spellings and meanings. Additionally, we would like to thank Detrans Voices for their guidance on this section.

Sex

noun, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male

Ex. The research found significant sex differences in how the symptoms of the disease present.

: sexual intercourse

Ex. A new study found that men report having less sex in the past decade.

Gender

noun, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex (synonym: sex-stereotypes)

Ex. Gender roles have resulted in women taking on the majority of emotional labor in the workplace.

⁸<https://www.advocate.com/media/2020/9/23/merriam-webster-updates-definition-bisexual>

Female

adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: of, relating to, or being the sex that typically has the capacity to bear young or produce eggs

Ex. Female inmates have experienced trauma at rates as high as 80 percent.

Male

adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: of, relating to, or being the sex that typically has the capacity to produce relatively small, usually motile gametes which fertilize the eggs of a female

Ex. Police are searching for a male taxi driver accused of sexual assault in New York.

Woman

noun, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: an adult female person (plural: "women")

Ex. Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space in 1963.

Man

noun, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: an adult male person (plural: "men")

Ex. Florida man saves child from alligator at local swimming hole.

Intersex (preferred: "Disorders of Sexual Development")

adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: of or relating to the condition of either having both male and female gonadal tissue in one individual or of having the gonads of one sex and external genitalia that is of the other sex or is ambiguous

Ex. Individuals with intersex conditions/disorders of sexual development may

face barriers when seeking medical treatment.

Sexual orientation

noun, definition by: Merriam-Webster (amended)

: a person's state of being bisexual, heterosexual, or homosexual

Ex. The Supreme Court ruled that it is unconstitutional for employers to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

Lesbian

noun or adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster (amended)

: a female person who is only sexually or romantically attracted to the same sex; of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to other women or between women

Ex. Angie Craig became the first out lesbian elected to Congress in 2018.

Gay

adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster (amended)

: of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's same sex

Ex. Gerry Studds became the first openly gay member of Congress in 1983 when he was outed during a House ethics hearing.

Bisexual

adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's same sex and of the opposite sex

Ex. Bisexual women face sexual violence at rates much higher than their lesbian or heterosexual counterparts.

Feminist

noun or adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: a person who supports or engages in the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes (also: "Feminism")

Ex. Feminists took to the streets to protest the treatment of women in the workplace.

Radical Feminism

noun, definition by: Rad Fem Collective⁹

: a feminist theory analyzing the structures of power which oppress the female sex (adjective or noun: "Radical Feminist")

Ex. Radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin have argued against pornography and the sex industry.

Gender Critical

adjective

: opposed to the societal imposition of gender roles in both traditional and modern forms (often used with "feminist," but not always)

Ex. Gender critical feminists opposed a bill that would allow boys to compete in girls' athletics.

: opposed to the ideology put forth by modern trans activists, especially the theory of gender identity or the medical affirmation model of treating gender dysphoria (common usage)

Ex. He doesn't support men competing in women's sports because he is gender critical.

⁹<http://www.radfemcollective.org/what-is-radical-feminism/>

Gender Dysphoria

noun, definition by: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5¹⁰

: a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, of at least 6 months' duration, manifested by at least two out of five specific diagnostic criteria and associated with clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning

Ex. Susie was diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria in 2015.

Detransition

verb, definition by: Detrans Voices¹¹

: the act of returning to living as one's biological sex after a period of medical transition to the opposite sex/gender

Ex. A growing number of young people are detransitioning.

Detransitioner

noun, definition by: Detrans Voices

: a person who has returned to living as one's biological sex after a period of medical transition to the opposite sex/gender

Ex. Detransitioners are speaking out about youth gender clinics.

Desistor (sometimes, 'Desister')

noun, definition by: Detrans Voices

: a person who previously identified as "transgender" (or "nonbinary") but no longer does, but who did not take medical steps to transition.

Ex. Support groups for desistors have been underfunded, leaving many teens to navigate the experience on their own.

¹⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296700032_The_DSM-5_Diagnostic_Criteria_for_Gender_Dysphoria

¹¹ <https://www.detransvoices.org/glossary/>

Desist

verb, definition by: Detrans Voices

: the act of desistance; reidentifying with one's birth sex or ceasing to identify as "transgender" (or "nonbinary") by a person who identified as "transgender" (or "nonbinary") for a period of time, but who did not take medical steps to transition

Ex. She chose to desist in Spring of 2020, realizing that she no longer identified with the label of "transgender".

Gender-nonconforming

adjective, definition by: Merriam-Webster

: exhibiting behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that do not correspond with the traits typically associated with one's sex (synonym: sex-stereotype nonconformity)

Ex. Gender-nonconforming men may be especially at risk of experiencing violence from other men.

SECTION 2: GUIDANCE ON COVERING VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Don't say "gender" when you mean "sex"

The use of the word "gender" to mean "sex" likely began as an attempt to avoid a word which could also mean "sexual intercourse," and therefore felt crude. However, as the words became increasingly synonymous in day-to-day language, the true differences between the meanings of the words became muddled both in language and in law. It is more important now than ever to be clear when discussing sex and gender which you truly are referencing.

Take this September 2020 headline in the *New York Times*¹² for example:

"A major study in India offers insights into on how the spread of the virus differs by age and gender"

However, what the referenced study¹³ actually says is:

"Risk of death was higher among male cases than among female cases overall, and the magnitude of this difference widened in the oldest age groups. Higher mortality in older age groups and among males have similarly been observed in high-income settings."

It's clear that the science is discussing sex differences, so the reporting should accurately reflect this.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/09/30/world/covid-19-coronavirus/a-major-study-in-india-offers-insights-into-on-how-the-spread-of-the-virus-differs-by-age-and-gender>

¹³ <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/09/29/science.abd7672>

Another common area in which this mistake occurs is when reporting on discrimination. For example, a headline in *Business Insider* from September 2020¹⁴ reads:

“61 years after RBG graduated from law school, the gender bias she faced is less obvious — but just as prevalent”

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex, not on the basis of *gender*, and this was the legal framework Ruth Bader-Ginsburg used to fight for equal rights. Likewise, Title IX also prohibits discrimination in education “*based on sex*”. When reporting on discrimination it is important to use terms that accurately reflect the root cause of the discrimination as well as the relevant legal context.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|--|---|
| “New study offers insights into on how the spread of the virus differs <i>by gender</i> ” | “New study offers insights into on how the spread of the virus differs <i>by sex</i> ” |
| “61 years after RBG graduated from law school, the <i>gender bias</i> she faced is less obvious — but just as prevalent” | “61 years after RBG graduated from law school, the <i>sex discrimination</i> she faced is less obvious — but just as prevalent” |

Use women-centered language to talk about women’s issues

In July of 2020, CNN published an article¹⁵ with this lede:

“Individuals with a cervix are now recommended to start cervical cancers screening at 25 and continue through age 65, with the primary human papillomavirus (HPV) testing every five years as the preferred method of testing, according to a new guideline released Thursday by the American

¹⁴<https://www.businessinsider.com/gender-discrimination-bias-ruth-bader-ginsburg-legal-career-professional-advancement-2020-9>

¹⁵<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/30/health/new-cervical-cancer-screening-recommendations-wellness/index.html>

Cancer Society.”

“Individuals with a cervix” is a term that intentionally obfuscates another, more clear word: “women”. Yet, up to half of women may not even know what a cervix is¹⁶. This intentional obfuscation puts women at risk by creating an unnecessary knowledge barrier to obtaining potentially life-saving information about their health.

In 2018, *The Guardian* tweeted¹⁷:

“Last year, YouGov asked 538 menstruators about their experiences of period pain in the workplace; 57% said it had affected their work.”

However, this summary of the research not only offends by reducing women to one of their many unique bodily functions, but it was also inaccurate. YouGov actually interviewed 1,000 women¹⁸, only 47 percent of whom currently got periods at the time of the research. The results indicated that 91 percent of the sample had experienced period pain (910), and 57 percent of those women who have worked say that period pain had impacted their ability to work (538). Many of those in that final 538 are *not* currently “menstruators” and were reflecting on past experiences. By attempting to remain “gender neutral” in their reporting, the publication actually published inaccurate information about important research. When talking about a sex-specific body part, condition, or experience, use sex-specific language that puts the focus on the individual rather than their body part to avoid inaccuracies.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|--|--|
| <i>“Individuals with a cervix should begin cervical cancer screening...”</i> | <i>“Women should begin cervical cancer screening...”</i> |
| <i>“We asked menstruators about their experiences of period pain”</i> | <i>“We asked women about their experiences of period pain”</i> |
| <i>“Womxn”</i> | <i>“Women”</i> |

¹⁶<https://www.jostrust.org.uk/node/666780>

¹⁷https://twitter.com/guardian_b2b/status/1055353012426686464

¹⁸<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/07/31/most-women-workers-have-found-it-harder-work-due-p>

Reporting on prostitution, the sex trade, and violence against women and girls

When reporting on prostitution, the sex trade, and male violence, it is important that coverage does not downplay or sugar-coat the reality of violence against women and girls. Avoid using the passive voice where it erases a man or men as the bad actor. Avoid euphemisms such as “sex worker” which perpetuate the “happy hooker myth” and downplay the violent reality of the sex trade and the trauma and victimization that women and girls sold for sex endure. This is especially true when discussing male sexual violence against children, who can never consent to being sold for sex.

For example, in 2017, *Reuters* published a story¹⁹ with the headline:

“Rescued child sex workers in India reveal hidden cells in brothels”

Despite discussing how women and children are trafficked from their homes and sold into sexual slavery, the article repeatedly refers to the victims, both adults and minors, as “sex workers”. This term implies some degree of willing participation on the part of the victim in the violent crimes committed against her, and obscurs the reality of the conditions the victims faced by comparing them to places of work.

When discussing women who do not appear to have been trafficked into the sex trade, it is more accurate to specifically describe their experience in the sex trade than to use the term “sex worker”. For example, instead of saying “Sex workers complain that OnlyFans...,” say “Online purveyors of sexual content complain that OnlyFans...”

Likewise, sexual violence should not be obscured behind terms such as “unwanted sex,” “sex with a minor,” or “unconsensual sex” when there are more clear terms such as “rape” and “statutory rape.” However, when reporting on the statement of a victim, it is appropriate to use the terms she herself used to describe her experience.

¹⁹<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-trafficking-brothels/rescued-child-sex-workers-in-india-reveal-hidden-cells-in-brothels-idUSKBNIE71R1>

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|---|---|
| "She was made homeless <i>by domestic violence</i> " | "She became homeless <i>when her husband became physically violent, and she was forced to flee for the safety of her children</i> " |
| "Sex workers push back against OnlyFans policy changes" | "Online sexual content creators push back against OnlyFans policy changes" |
| "Child sex worker" | "Child sex-trafficking victim" |
| "Sex with a minor" | "Statutory rape" |
| "Celebrity accused of <i>unwanted sex</i> " | "Celebrity accused of <i>rape</i> " |
| "Gender-based violence" | "Male violence against women" |
| "Child pornography" | "Filmed commercial sexual exploitation of children" |

SECTION 3: GUIDANCE ON COVERING SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND LGB ISSUES

Trans identities, disorders of sexual development, and sexual fetishes are separate issues from sexual orientation

The use of the term “LGBT” (and its ever-expanding cousins such as “LGGBTQQIAAPPK”²⁰) has led to the conflation of the demographics, interests, and needs of four very different communities. Unless the matter at hand is explicitly relevant to Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, *and* Trans-identified individuals, do not use the term “LGBT” or any of its expansive derivatives.

Homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual are sexual orientations. They are the only three physically possible sexual orientations in a sexually dimorphic species such as humans. Terms such as “pansexual” which rely on the unscientific concept of gender-identity should not be used. Asexual is not a sexual orientation but rather a lack of one, similar to how atheism is not itself a religion but the lack of a religion.

When discussing the community of people who are attracted to the same sex (lesbians, gays, and bisexuals), the acronym “LGB” is appropriate. “Transgender” is an identity. A person who identifies as transgender may or may not be attracted to the same sex, and trans-identification does not inherently contain any relevance to the issue of sexual orientation, nor does the LGB community necessarily share the interests of trans-identified individuals.

Likewise, individuals with disorders of sexual development (DSDs) are people with a medical condition related to the development of their sex. They are not necessarily same-sex attracted (although they may be), and the interests and needs of the

²⁰<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=LGGBTQQIAAPPK>

community are unique to their experience with little overlap to the interests and needs of the LGB community. Additionally, The term “intersex” is a misnomer and leads to confusion by implying someone is “between” the sexes. All humans are either male or female (even if they experience a DSD), and the sex of an individual is able to be determined via DNA testing when their sex is ambiguous. Avoid using the term “intersex” when possible to avoid this confusion.

Sexual fetishes such as kink, polyamory, or BDSM are also not sexual orientations and do not belong lumped in with the LGB community.

The term “LGBT” may be appropriate to use when referencing organizations that do explicitly advocate for both LGB and Trans-identified communities, or when referencing research that fails to separate an “LGBT” sample into more specific categories.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|--|--|
| “The <i>LGBTQIA</i> community celebrated the decision to legalize same-sex marriage” | “The <i>LGB</i> community celebrated the decision to legalize same-sex marriage” |
| “ <i>Intersex</i> people” | “People with disorders of sexual development” |

Use of the word “queer”

The word “queer” is a slur which has historically been associated with violence against gays and lesbians. It is inappropriate to use this word to describe gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. It may be appropriate to use this word when discussing “queer theory,” a field of critical theory, or when specifically discussing how someone identifies themselves. For a blanket term to describe people who are not entirely straight, the term “same-sex attracted” may be appropriate.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|-----------------------|---|
| <i>"Queer people"</i> | <i>"LGB people," "Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people," or "homosexual and bisexual people," or "same-sex attracted people"</i> |

The LGB community is not a monolith

When relevant, try not to lump the entire LGB community together. Gay men, lesbians, and bisexual men and women have different experiences, needs, and advocacy interests. Instead of reporting on "the LGB community" as a monolith, try to dig into which community specifically is relevant to the subject at hand.

If reporting on matters that impact the entire LGB community, try to get a diverse range of perspectives, especially including that of lesbian and bisexual women. Do not assume that gay men and lesbians share the same perspective and experiences, and likewise do not assume that bisexual men and gay men or bisexual women and lesbians share the same perspective and experiences. Push sources for sex-specific data when discussing LGB issues. Be clear about which populations your cited statistics apply to.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|--|--|
| <i>"LGB people report experiencing higher rates of sexual violence."</i> | <i>"74.9 percent of bisexual women report experiencing sexual violence²¹, compared to 46.4 percent of lesbians and 43.3 percent of straight women."</i> |

²¹https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_sofindings.pdf

SECTION 4: GUIDANCE WHEN REPORTING ON ISSUES RELATED TO TRANS IDENTITIES

Reporting the sex of trans-identified individuals

In accordance with the ethical journalism principle of truth and accuracy, it is always appropriate to use sex-based pronouns for individuals regardless of their identity. The use of inaccurate pronouns misleads the public by providing false information about the subject or source's sex.

It is especially important to accurately report the sex of crime victims and perpetrators since misrepresenting this information can seriously mislead the public on matters of safety. It is appropriate to mention any previous names of accused or convicted criminals because this information is also a matter of public interest and safety.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|---|--|
| "Caitlyn Jenner discusses <i>her</i> split from Kris Jenner" | "Caitlyn Jenner discusses <i>his</i> split from Kris Jenner" |
| "Preferred pronouns" | "Inaccurate pronouns" |
| "Karen White, 52, admitted sexually assaulting women in prison" | "Karen White (<i>né Stephen Wood</i>), 52, admitted sexually assaulting women in prison" |

Common terms to avoid

When it is relevant to discuss the sex or identity of a subject or source, do not use terms such as “gender identity,” “transgender woman,” “trans man,” “cisgender woman,” or “cis man”. These terms are either too loosely defined to be meaningful in accurate reporting or are actively harmful due to perpetuating inaccurate information. It may be appropriate to use these words when describing how a subject or source describes themselves; however, further clarity will probably be required.

“Gender identity”

The words “transgender,” “cisgender,” and “nonbinary” all rely on the poorly-defined and unscientific notion of “gender identity”. Often described as an individual’s “internal sense of being male or female,” there is no verifiable evidence²² to defend the idea that such a sense exists for most people, making it an inaccurate or misleading term for journalists to use. If discussing the stated “gender identity” of a subject or source, simply stating either how they identify or that they are “gender-nonconforming” is often more accurate. If someone has not explicitly claimed to have a “gender identity”, it is never appropriate to claim they do either directly or indirectly with the use of terms that rely on this concept (such as, for example, claiming someone is “cisgender” when they have never reported feeling a “gender identity”).

The term “gender identity” has been used in some recent laws and court decisions, despite not being defined in law. It may be appropriate to use the term when reporting on these laws; however, it should be clarified that the term has no objective meaning or legal definition.

“Cisgender”

The term “cisgender” is commonly defined as, “of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth”. Since it depends on the unverifiable and poorly defined term “gender identity,” it is equally inaccurate and useless. Referring to an individual as a “cis woman,” “cis man,” or as “cisgender” perpetuates the idea that all people have a gender identity (there is no evidence of this) and that anyone who does not consider

²²<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20502877.2020.1720429>

him or herself transgender identifies with all gender roles prescribed on the basis of sex. There is rarely a need to specify that someone does not identify as transgender; however, if that is the case, simply say so. Otherwise, the term should only be used if quoting a source directly.

“Transgender”

Likewise, the term “transgender” is defined as, “of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth.” Once again, relying on the unproven premise of gender identity. Regardless, many individuals do identify as transgender. Acknowledge this identity by clearly stating it as such. For example, rather than saying “transgender teens” say “teens who identify as transgender.”

“Trans woman,” “Trans man,” etc

Do not use the phrase “transgender woman,” or its variants. By using the term “trans” or “transgender” as an adjective describing the noun woman, the phrasing implies that “trans women” are a subset of “women.” This is inaccurate since these individuals are a subset of men. Rather, simply say “men who identify as women,” “trans-identifying males,” “girls who identify as boys,” etc. Instead of saying, “Susie, a transgender woman,” say “Susie, a man who identifies as a woman”. This more accurately reports on the reality of the situation and provides clear information to the reader, and should be equally applied regardless of any medical or legal intervention an individual has undergone in an attempt to resemble the opposite sex.

“Nonbinary”

Likewise, “nonbinary” should never be used itself as an adjective but rather clearly stated as an identity. For example, “Susie, a man who identifies as nonbinary.”

“Sex assigned at birth”

Do not use the phrase “sex assigned at birth”. This is a phrase that was co-opted from the intersex community who may experience forced genital mutilation as infants to more closely align their external genitalia with either male or female genitalia. No person who does not have a disorder of sexual development is ever “assigned” a sex a birth. Rather, say, “sex observed at birth,” if necessary at all.

“TERF”

Do not use the term “trans-exclusionary radical feminist” (or “TERF”). This is also a nonsense phrase that is inherently contradictory since radical feminists, by definition, include all female people regardless of identity. The term is widely considered derogatory and is often used in conjunction with misogynistic abuse and threats. It is more accurate to specifically describe the individual’s actual political position, likely either as a “radical feminist,” “gender critical feminist,” or simply “gender critical” if they are not otherwise aligned with feminism.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|---|--|
| <i>“Transgender teens face housing crisis”</i> | <i>“Teens who identify as transgender face housing crisis”</i> |
| <i>“Susie, a transgender woman, said...”</i> | <i>“Susie, a man who identifies as a woman, said...”</i> |
| <i>“Cis women should receive pap smears annually”</i> | <i>“Women should receive pap smears annually”</i> |
| <i>“Susie, who is nonbinary, said...”</i> | <i>“Susie, who identifies as nonbinary, said...”</i> |
| <i>“Sex assigned at birth”</i> | <i>“Sex observed at birth”</i> |
| <i>“TERF”</i> | <i>“Radical feminist,” “gender critical feminist,” or “gender critical activist,” etc...</i> |

Reporting on violence and discrimination against trans-identified individuals

When reporting on violence or discrimination against trans-identified individuals (or related statistics) it is important to accurately reflect the sex of both the victim and perpetrator and to examine the root cause of the violence or discrimination. In most cases, what is commonly referred to as “transphobia” is likely actually homophobia or discrimination based on sex (such as discrimination based on gender-nonconformity or sex-role stereotyping). When this is the case, these root causes of violence and discrimination should be explicitly named. For example, in September

2020, *The Hill* reported²³:

“At least 13 UN member states criminalize being transgender, according to the Trans Legal Mapping Report.”

However, this is an inaccurate representation of that research. What the study²⁴ actually says is:

“In only a handful of countries are trans persons explicitly criminalised, either through a piece of legislation or religious law or edict (which often have the force of law) and are easily classified as so-called “cross-dressing” laws. This is the case in the following thirteen countries: Brunei, the Gambia, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, South Sudan, Tonga, and the United Arab Emirates.”

It’s clear from actually reading the study that trans identity itself is rarely criminalized, but rather specific acts of gender nonconformity are made illegal. This is an important distinction because someone can have a trans identity while displaying no gender nonconformity; meanwhile, many individuals who do not identify as transgender, particularly gay men and lesbians, may actually be highly gender-nonconforming and targeted under these same laws.

When reporting on violence against individual trans-identified people, it is important to make clear when individuals are victims of male violence by current or former romantic partners, or when they experience violence as a result of victimization in the sex trade. This is a common cause of violence against trans-identified individuals that is often overlooked. Failing to report this information does a disservice to the community by misrepresenting the risks they face.

Do not conflate women’s sex-based rights (such as those outlined in Title IX) with discrimination against trans-identified people.

²³ <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/519060-it-is-still-illegal-to-be-transgender-in-these-countries>

²⁴ https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_World_Trans_Legal_Mapping_Report_2019_EN.pdf

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|--|---|
| <i>"Transgender women face a heightened risk of violence from men in prison"</i> | <i>"Gender-nonconforming men face a heightened risk of violence from other men in prison"</i> |
| <i>"Trans woman in Baltimore murdered in third transphobic attack in three years"</i> | <i>"Baltimore man murdered by former partner in alleged homophobic attack"</i> |
| <i>"It should be illegal for housing providers to discriminate based on gender identity"</i> | <i>"It should be illegal for housing providers to discriminate based on gender nonconformity"</i> |
| <i>"Trans students are fighting discrimination in girls' sports"</i> | <i>"Male students are fighting for the ability to participate in girls' sports"</i> |
| <i>"Trans athletes banned from women's sports"</i> | <i>"Athletes must compete on the basis of sex," or, "Women's sports will be reserved for female athletes"</i> |
| <i>"It is still illegal to be transgender in 13 UN countries"</i> | <i>"It is still illegal to cross-dress in 13 UN countries"</i> |

Reporting on trans suicide and medical intervention

There are already many great tools for journalists reporting on suicide and health care. However, many of these guidelines are ignored by journalists specifically when reporting on the community of trans-identified individuals. We will reiterate some of the most relevant points on this subject here.

ReportingOnSuicide.org provides a variety of recommendations²⁵ for journalists.

Some key points include:

- *Don't present suicide as a common or acceptable response to hardship.*
- *Don't oversimplify or speculate on the reasons for suicide*
- *Don't overstate the problem of suicide by using descriptors like "epidemic" or "skyrocketing"*
- *Report that coping skills, support, and treatment work for most people who*

²⁵<https://reportingonsuicide.org/recommendations/#dodonts>

have thought about suicide

- *Provide context and facts to counter perceptions that the suicide was tied to heroism, honor, or loyalty to an individual or group*
- *Include Resources; at a minimum, include the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, and Crisis Text Line, or local crisis phone numbers*
- *Emphasize Help and Hope*

Now, consider this September 2020 reporting from *Reuters*²⁶ in an article titled, *“Reported murders, suicides of trans people soar in Brazil”*:

“The number of trans people – 16 – who died by suicide in the first six months of 2020 is a third higher than last year as well, ANTRA said. “The outlook is bleak,” said Bruna Benevides, a trans activist and author of ANTRA’s report, via messaging service WhatsApp. “The death of trans people ... starts long before the trigger is pulled. It’s in the insults, the evictions from home, the lack of job opportunities, it’s at school where gender is never discussed,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.”

While the article is reporting on an important public health concern, it fails to meet the standards of journalistic ethics when reporting on suicide by: overstating the problem, speculating on reasons for the suicides (without any knowledge of the individual cases or reasons), linking the suicides to group affiliation, and failing to provide resources or hope.

Another September 2020 article in *The Hill*²⁷ makes similar mistakes, titled:

“Vote for gender affirmation: Life and death choice”

It is important to follow best practices to reduce the risk of social contagion when reporting on suicide, especially of an at-risk population.

Likewise, when reporting on medicine, journalists should be held to ethical standards of both accuracy and harm reduction. The Association for Healthcare Journalists

²⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-lgbt-murders-trfn-idUSKBN25Z310>

²⁷ <https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/518954-vote-for-gender-affirmation-life-and-death-choice>

provides many resources on reporting on healthcare, including some simple guidelines to follow²⁸. A few key points relevant to reporting on so-called “sexual reassignment surgeries,” “puberty blockers,” and “cross-sex hormones” are outlined below:

- *Understand the process of medical research*
- *Avoid vague, sensational language*
- *Quantify the magnitude of the benefit or the risk*
- *Report the complete risks and benefits of any treatment*
- *Clearly define and communicate areas of doubt and uncertainty*
- *Distinguish between advocacy and reporting*

The same September 2020 article in *The Hill* discussed the use of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones on minors for five paragraphs, only reporting on positive findings related to mental health. The article fails to mention that these drugs are being used off-label and are not FDA approved for this use²⁹, that there may be medical risks associated with taking these drugs (including death), and that long-term outcomes are not known³⁰. This is unethical reporting.

When discussing so-called “gender reassignment surgery”, an inaccurate and vague term, it is better to use a more specific description of the medical intervention that has occurred. For example, phrases such as “cosmetic body modification”, “cosmetic genital surgery”, or specific names of the procedures when they exist, such as “double mastectomy”, are more accurate.

When discussing medical interventions related to trans-identified individuals, especially youth, it is also good practice to include the perspective of detransitioners – individuals who have ended or attempted to reverse the effects of medical transition. These perspectives are under-reported and are necessary for providing balanced and nuanced reporting.

²⁸<https://healthjournalism.org/secondarypage-details.php?id=56>

²⁹<https://www.seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE2572.pdf>

³⁰<https://fda.gov/sense/app/d10be6bb-494e-4cd2-82e4-0135608ddc13/sheet/45beeb74-30ab-46be-8267-5756582633b4/state/analysis>

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|---|--|
| "Reported suicides of <i>trans people</i> soar in Brazil" | "Reported suicides of <i>trans-identified people</i> increased 33% in Brazil this year" |
| "Vote for gender affirmation: <i>Life and death choice</i> " | "Vote on gender affirmation <i>will impact medical treatment of trans-identified youth</i> " |
| "The outlook for <i>trans youth</i> is bleak" | "Trans-identified youth can overcome depression and suicidal ideation with therapy, learned coping skills, and a strong support system" |
| "At the age of 18, Sally underwent gender reassignment surgery" | "Doctors performed an elective double mastectomy on Sally when she was 18 years old" |
| "These medications temporarily put on pause a youth's endogenous puberty and prevent the development of irreversible secondary sex characteristics that may be devastating to <i>trans youth.</i> " | "These medications, which are used off-label without FDA approval, interrupt a youth's normal endogenous puberty and prevent the development of secondary sex characteristics. However, the long-term effects of the drugs are still unknown." |

Additional guidance on reporting on gender, trans identities, and detransition

If you are citing research or data that are not fully sex-segregated (for example, includes men who identify as women in the category of “women,” or allows participants to self-identify their “gender” rather than accurately records their sex), this should always be clarified.

When reporting on new laws or cases that reference the concepts of “gender identity” or “transgender people,” always consider the impact on women and girls. Talk to expert sources on the area of women’s rights that could be impacted by the new laws or rulings.

When discussing people who formerly identified as “transgender” or “nonbinary” but no longer do, it is important to note the difference between “detransitioners” and “desistors.” Detransitioners formerly underwent some form of medical intervention. Desistors (sometimes called “desisters”) did not undergo medical intervention in regards to their identity.

| Instead of this: | Say this: |
|---|--|
| “About 10 percent of murders in the United States <i>are committed by women</i> ” | “About 10 percent of murders in the United States <i>are committed by women or men who identify as women</i> ” |
| “Susie <i>desisted</i> two years after her voluntary double mastectomy” | “Susie <i>detransitioned</i> two years after her voluntary double mastectomy” |
| “Jane <i>detransitioned</i> before receiving any medical intervention” | “Jane <i>desisted</i> before receiving any medical intervention” |

SECTION 5: AVOIDING COMMON MISINFORMATION

There is no dearth of misinformation in reporting on the gender debate, specifically. These are a few of the most commonly shared pieces of misinformation, and guidance on avoiding falling prey to disinformation campaigns while reporting on sex and gender.

Myth: Feminists who oppose “gender identity” policies are right-wing or “fake feminists”

Feminist women and organizations are often accused of being secretly right-wing or “fake feminists”³¹ when they oppose “gender identity” policies. Radical feminists are the most common targets of this accusation, despite many women arriving at radical feminism from the left. Still, feminism itself is not a left or right issue. Broadly, feminism advocates for the equality of the sexes. This is a global goal that extends well beyond the confines of the American political binary, and so feminists come in all shapes and sizes.

Further, working with right-wing politicians or organizations to accomplish progress for women does not make feminists right-wing. It makes them part of a long tradition of reaching across the aisle to strategically advance women’s civil rights.

Further reading:

- [WoLF FAQs: Why do we work with Conservatives?](#)

³¹<https://www.mediamatters.org/tucker-carlson/right-wing-media-and-think-tanks-are-aligning-fake-feminists-who-dehumanize-trans>

Myth: There is an epidemic of violence against “trans women”

The myth that there is an “epidemic of violence against trans women,” specifically “trans women of color” and “black trans women” has been repeated in almost every major media outlet. Even a single avoidable death, especially a homicide, is a tragic loss of life. However, this myth is based on a few horrible cases, not the actual rates of murder experienced by different demographic groups.

In 2018 in the United States, 4.4 people in every 100,000 were murdered. The murder rate for women, specifically, was 2 in 100,000. However, the murder rate for people who identify as “transgender” was roughly 1.9 in 100,000—less than either women or the general population.

There are clear factors that did impact these victims’ risk levels. Nine of the 26 people who were killed in 2018 while identifying as “transgender” were murdered while being prostituted. Twenty-one were black, and 25 were male—factors which each drastically increase their likelihood of murder. Seventeen in every 100,000 black Americans were murdered in 2018, nearly four times the rate of the general population.

Reporting misinformation about the deaths of men who identify as women, though, does these victims a disservice by misrepresenting their true causes of death and hiding role that class, race, and sexual violence (including prostitution) play in these tragic cases. This misrepresentation causes further harm by distracting policy makers and diverting much-needed resources away from organizations addressing these true risk factors.

Further reading:

- [*An Epidemic of Misinformation: Murder Rates and the Transgender Population*](#)

Myth: Disorders of sexual development (i.e., “intersex” conditions) negate the human sex binary

The existence of disorders or differences of sexual development or hermaphrodites of other species is commonly used to “prove” that human sex is not binary. Activists from the DSD community, though, resist this characterization since it perpetuates medical misinformation about the disorders with which they live.

Primary sex determination occurs upon fertilization, and is determined by the presence or lack of a Y chromosome. Every human must have an X chromosome (fetuses without one are non-viable). If there is any Y chromosome present, the fetus is genetically male. If there is no Y chromosome present, the fetus is genetically female. Thus, a fetus with XXXY chromosomes would not be on a “spectrum” between male and female—they are male because of the presence of a Y chromosome. Likewise, a fetus with only an X chromosome (XO) is female because of the absence of a Y chromosome.

Sex differentiation occurs throughout the development of the fetus into puberty, when a variety of other factors including genetics and the environment can influence the phenotypical expression of the primary sex. This does not change the genetic sex determination.

Activists from the community have expressed that the term “disorders of sexual development” is preferred over the term “intersex” as it leads to confusion about their medical conditions.

Further reading:

- [*The Dangerous Denial of Sex*](#)
- [*Is Sex a Spectrum? Sex Determination and Differentiation*](#)

SECTION 6: LIST OF RECOMMENDED EXPERT SOURCES

Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement of this document, WoLF, or any particular political or policy stance from either the recommended sources or their professional affiliations.

Sasha Ayad, LPC | Youth gender treatment & parental guidance

[Inspired Teen Therapy](#)

Society for Evidence-Based Gender Medicine

Email: sasha@inspiredteentherapy.com

Phone: (888) 945-8207

Callie Burt, Ph.D. | Feminist criminology, Race

Sociologist and Criminologist, Georgia State University

Email: cburt@gsu.edu

Natasha Chart | Women's rights, Impact of "gender identity" policies

Executive Director, Women's Liberation Front

Email: media@womensliberationfront.org

Lierre Keith | LBG rights, Women's rights

Founder and Board Member, Women's Liberation Front

Email: media@womensliberationfront.org

Michael K Laidlaw, MD | Endocrinology

Endocrinologist

Email: docdrLaidlaw@gmail.com

Phone: (916) 315-9100

Lisa Littman, MD, MPH | Gender dysphoria, detransition
Public health physician and researcher
Email: littmanresearch@gmail.com

Janice Raymond | Transsexualism, LGB rights, Prostitution & the sex trade
Author, *The Transsexual Empire*
Email: jraymond@umass.edu

Beth Stelzer | Women's sports
Founder, Save Women's Sports
Email: info@savewomessports.com

Jane Wheeler, JD | Medical ethics, LGB Rights for GNC children & youth
President, Rethink Identity Medicine Ethics
Email: jane@rethinkime.org