



# WHY USING THE RIGHT PRONOUNS MATTERS

## EXPLORING THE PRONOUN 'IT'

Using people's pronouns is important because it's part of treating people as fully human. Most people do this automatically for cis people, but struggle to do this for trans and gender-nonconforming people.

You don't have to understand someone's gender to respect them as a person enough to accept it. You don't have to understand why someone wants to be treated a certain way in order to do that: when it comes to gender, you already have practice interacting with people of different genders and with people whose genders you don't know!

Trans and gender non-conforming people face constant attacks targeting their genders, as well as anti-trans harassment and violence. Using the wrong pronoun for a trans person is a piece of a much larger attack. Because of this, using the wrong pronoun for trans and gender non-conforming people can be really hurtful (even if these things may not hurt cis people).

## TREATING PEOPLE AS HUMAN IS IMPORTANT!

So much extreme violence against groups of people, throughout history and still today, is justified on the basis that certain people are not really human. This has been especially true for violence that targets groups according to things like race & ethnicity, and disability, but includes things like gender identity and sexual orientation.

Anything that denies someone's humanity is dangerous and can be very hurtful. Often, people call others "it" as a way to deny their humanity. A few trans people reclaim "it" as a form of resistance. This is very different to cis people trying to use "it" pronouns.

# WHAT ARE PRONOUNS?

Pronouns are the little words that we use when talking about people, animals, things, etc. For example, she/her/hers, he/him/his, we/us/ours, they/them/theirs, I/me/mine and it/it/its, as well as newer non-binary pronouns like ze/hir/hirs, ey/em/eirs, xe/xem/xyrs, etc.

In English, the pronouns we use (for other people) have genders: we usually use different pronouns for a woman (e.g., 'she') than we would for a man (e.g., 'he') or for someone whose gender is unknown or not specified (e.g., 'they'). Often non-binary people use they/them/their pronouns or specific non-binary pronouns (e.g., 'ze' or 'ey').

It can get complicated because you can't really tell someone's gender just by looking at them! People often assume which pronouns to use for someone based on what they think their genders might be, but these assumptions can be wrong and regularly cause a lot of problems, especially for transgender and gender non-conforming people.

It can also get complicated because the pronouns that people choose for themselves do not always clearly match their genders (e.g., for a non-binary person who uses 'she'). Also, some people do not feel like any pronouns work for them, so people always just use their names instead.

Unless someone is wearing sign declaring their pronouns, the only way you can really know what pronouns someone uses is to ask! It's helpful to tell people your pronouns and ask people for theirs: then you can use their correct pronouns!

## DEFINITIONS

Cisgender people are people whose genders simply matches the genders they were assigned at birth. (E.g., someone said "it's a girl!" and they grew up to be a girl/woman).

Transgender people are people whose genders are different from the genders they were assigned at birth. Trans people may be girls/women or boys/men, but they may also be non-binary people, people without a gender, people with fluctuating gender, etc.).

The word "transgender" covers a wide diversity of experiences and identities. Not everyone under this umbrella is comfortable identifying as trans. In this booklet, we're using trans an umbrella term, including non-binary people.

Non-binary people are people whose genders do not fit neatly into the colonial 2-gender system of women and men. Non-binary people are extremely diverse. Some non-binary genders are culturally specific.

HI, MY PRONOUNS  
ARE THEY/THEM &  
SHE/HER.  
HOW ABOUT YOU?



## WHY USE PEOPLE'S PRONOUNS?

Using someone's pronouns shows you accept their gender (even if you don't understand it). It shows that you are trying to treat someone like a real person (the way most people do with cis people without even thinking about it).


Using the wrong pronouns says that you do not respect people enough to try to accept their genders. This can be deeply harmful for trans people whose genders are already constant targets of hostility & violence!

Cis people don't have to deal with constant denial of their genders or the hostility and violence aimed at trans people. When someone uses the wrong pronouns for a cis person, it's a minor one-time thing.

However, trans people and those questioning their gender have to live with constant attacks and messages saying that they & their genders are wrong (& therefore "deserve" violence, etc.). When people use the wrong pronouns, it is yet another small piece of a larger attack that never ends. So that can really hurt.

## OKAY WITH ANY PRONOUNS?

Some cis folks say they are okay with any pronouns (or don't care) but then get upset if anyone regularly starts using pronouns that don't match their genders. This is very different from trans folks who choose any/all pronouns because they delight in the gender queering & ambiguity from mixing pronouns. And different from trans folks who avoid pronouns because none work.



Hello, I use any pronouns!

## PRETENDING TO IDENTIFY AS THINGS HURTS OTHERS!

Some people do not respect trans people & believe that being trans is ridiculous. Some will joke about identifying as inanimate objects as a way to criticise & mock trans people without having to say anything directly about trans people—implying it's the same thing. That is very hurtful: trans people's are not pretending!



# THE VIOLENCE OF SAYING SOMEONE IS NOT HUMAN

A lot of people throughout history have been seriously harmed because others do not believe they are really human, & this continues today.

Denying that certain groups of people are “really human” has been part of the way that people and governments have justified colonial genocide of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island and the residential school system, Black slavery, and other genocides. This has also been part of how people have justified the eugenic violence of killing people with particular disabilities and forcibly sterilising others, and painful and dangerous medical experiments performed on groups of Black people and others without their knowledge or consent.

While these things are no longer “officially” done in Canada anymore, Indigenous women continue to be sterilised against their will when giving birth, Black and Indigenous people continue to be targeted for police violence and are massively over-represented in the prison system, elders and people living with chronic and disabling health issues are being denied adequate medical care and housing, often leading to their deaths.

## CALLING PEOPLE “IT” AS AN ACT OF VIOLENCE

One way that people label someone as “not really human” is by calling that person “it” (i.e., the same pronoun used for inanimate objects and non-human animals). While non-human life deserves respect too, the way we show respect to human people is different from the way we show respect toward other life. Calling a human person “it” is very often part of treating that person in a way that would be obviously harmful even to a non-human animal.

These days, people who do not look easy to classify as “women” or “men” are often called “it” as a way to justify abuse & violence, or deny basic needs. This is often worst for those also dehumanised by racism or ableism.



## WHO IS CALLED "IT" AGAINST THEIR WILL?

Many intersex individuals and individuals with differences of sex development are forced into surgeries to change their genitals in ways that leave them in pain and unable to function properly. Often parents are convinced to allow these surgeries on babies or children to avoid their child being an "it".

People whose bodies or gender expressions do not neatly fit into the categories of what people understand to be "women" or "men" face high risks of harassment, physical & sexual violence (both from strangers and people in their lives). They also face being called "it" as part of this harassment and violence.

The impact of calling someone "it" really depends on what they experience in the rest of their life.

For a cis person who is generally used to being treated like a real human person, being called "it" every now and then probably won't hurt very much on its own.

But for someone who is used to having their humanity denied regularly at every turn, being called "it" is yet another small piece of a much larger attack that never lets up and never stops. It can be extremely hurtful & do a lot of damage.

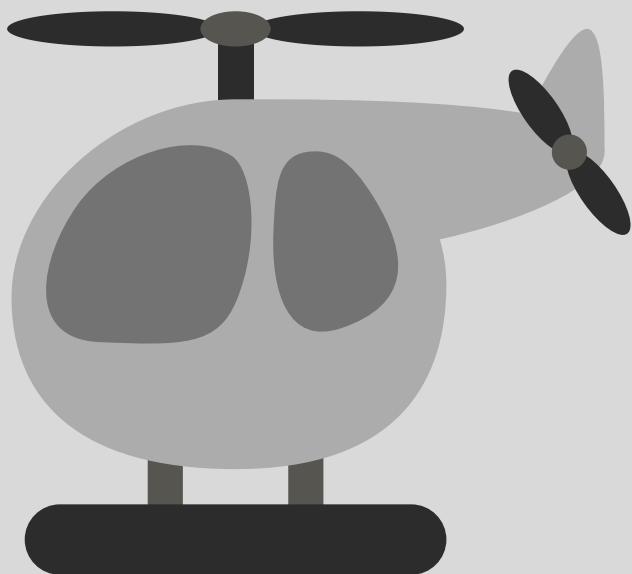
## WHO ASKS TO BE CALLED "IT" AND WHY?

Some (though few) trans people who experience the violence of routinely being treated as "not really human" and called "it" by people who can't make sense of their gender choose to use the pronoun "it", as a form of resistance. The idea is take back the word "it" from those using it against them, and hold it as a mirror to deflect the dehumanisation.

This is very different from when cis people (who do not experience this ongoing violence) play at asking to be called "it". Unlike others, they will still be recognised as human no matter what, so calling them "it" hides the power of "it" in plain sight, making "it" an even more powerful weapon to dehumanise others. Sometimes cis people even ask to be called "it" as a way of ridiculing trans people!



## “I IDENTIFY AS AN ATTACK HELICOPTER & MY PRONOUN IS IT”



This references an internet post: someone claimed to identify as an attack helicopter & accused friends of being “heliophobic” if they do not call the author by the helicopter’s model name/number, or let the author kill people. This became an online meme— people claiming to identify as attack helicopters (or other inanimate objects) as a way of ridiculing & attacking transgender or non-binary people.

This meme is transphobic. It works by implying that trans people asking to be called by their chosen names or to use their gender-appropriate bathroom is somehow similar to the meme’s author asking to kill people! But they’re completely different! There’s no comparison.

Someone using a bathroom that matches their gender does not hurt anyone! But it is necessary to be safe & comfortable. This is especially true for trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people who face high risks of harassment or assault in any public washrooms, and even higher risks in washrooms whose assigned genders do not match theirs.

Pretending to be or identify as an inanimate object is one way that people can communicate that they do not believe that trans people’s genders are as valid as cis people’s genders... without even having to say that. It can be very hurtful when cisgender people claim to identify as inanimate objects (when they really don’t!).

### POINT OF PRIVILEGE

Being able to make jokes ridiculing other people’s realities in ways that can hurt them but can’t hurt you is evidence of your privilege.



## COLONIAL GENDER BINARY

The Gender Binary is a the social system where there are exactly two genders (women and men).

In this system, women are supposed to be “feminine” and have certain types of bodies and men are supposed to be “masculine” and have certain other types of bodies, and everyone is supposed to fit into one of these two (and only two) categories. Some of this works by presuming that women and men are “opposite” genders, and that femininity is the “opposite” of masculinity (and assigning men and masculinity a higher status than women and femininity).

Under the Gender Binary, women and men have different social roles and face different sets of social expectations. For example being a “good man” or a “real man” is very different from being a “good woman” or a “real woman”. These different roles don't leave room for anything else and make it possible to structure society around hetero marriage/couples with built-in hostility toward other ways of being or building relationships and families (i.e., heterosexism).

There is a lot of violence directed toward people whose genders, bodies and appearances don't fit neatly into this system. For example, trans women face a lot of violence because their bodies might not “look like” what women's bodies are “supposed” to look like, etc. (i.e., transphobia, and for trans women in particular transmisogyny). There is also a lot of violence directed at people who don't fit neatly enough into gender roles or do hetero relationships (i.e., homophobia). This violence can be especially dangerous for people who also experience racism or ableism.

The Gender Binary presents itself as “natural” and a lot of people living within it believe that it is. But it neither natural nor universal. The only reason the Gender Binary exists on Turtle Island is because colonisers brought it and imposed it as part of the process of colonisation. The Gender Binary was used to justify so much of this colonial violence (e.g., Residential schools) and continues to uphold it to this day.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Throughout history, there have been people all over the world with many different genders. This rigid system of exactly 2 genders mapped on to 2 “types” of bodies is a rare exception! (Even if this seems completely “normal” in this colonial society.)

## A weird & limiting gender system



## **USING THE RIGHT PRONOUN: WHY DOES "IT" MATTER?**

As trans educators, we are often asked about pronouns: why they are such a big deal?

- Using the correct pronouns is a way of treating people as real, human people.
- So much anti-trans violence works by stripping away trans people's humanity. Often this is done by calling us "it".
- Part of reclaiming our humanity is choosing language that reflects our genders (even if others don't always use it).

**It matters why  
someone is  
using "it"!**



## **WHAT ABOUT THE PRONOUN "IT"?**

- A few trans people choose the pronoun "it" as a way to resist being dehumanised.
- Some cis people pretend to identify as objects & use the pronouns "it" as a way to attack trans identities.
- This can really harm trans folks & those questioning their genders because these things are not similar.
- Trans people are NOT pretending!