We all have a **gender identity**, or an internal sense of being masculine, feminine, or other gendered, which may or may not be visible to others, and a **gender expression**, or a way of representing and expressing our gender identity to others. When an individual’s gender identity and expression conflicts with societal expectations, they are often subject to harassment, abuse, and discrimination as they challenge the idea of a strict gender binary.

An individual whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth can identify as transgender, or “trans”, rather than being cisgender, or someone whose gender identity, expression, or behavior matches those associated with their assigned sex at birth. There are a range of other ways of identifying for non-cisgender individuals, based on sex identity and sexual preference, too! (See the glossary online)

Over recent years, the transgender community has seen an increased spotlight through the visibility of individuals like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock. However, the transgender community still faces challenges and violations of their human rights, such as disproportionate homelessness, violence against transgender women, and discrimination from public accommodations. With this in mind, it is more important than ever for allies of the LGBT community to have a basic understanding of what transgender and gender nonconforming identities mean and how best to be an ally for the transgender community.

Because gender is often presented as strictly male or female, it’s easy to forget not all people who identify as transgender identify as “male-to-female” or “female-to-male”. Other ways that people can identify include *genderqueer*, *agender*, and *bigender*. Additionally, many cultures have non-binary gender identities, such as *hijras* in South Asia or *two-spirit* for some Native Americans.
Pronouns are parts of speech that replace other nouns. When we talk about gender pronouns, we’re talking about personal pronouns, words that refer to a person. Pronouns include first person (I), second person (you), or third person (he, she, they). Pronouns allow a person to accurately represent their identity in a way that is safe and comfortable for them, and pronouns let others know what pronouns to use when talking about or to.

Know Your Own Pronoun. How do you identify yourself? Introduce yourself with your own pronouns “Hi, my name is Marie, I’m a human rights activist, and my pronouns are XX.” When introducing yourself, think carefully about what you say. It is a privilege to not have to think about your own pronouns, or worry which pronouns others will use based on your perceived gender.

Ask for Pronouns. When you meet someone new, don’t assume how they identify or what their pronouns are. Try asking: “What are your pronouns?”, or “What pronouns do you like to hear?”

Respect Pronouns. Consistently use the pronouns someone has shared with you. Listen. Don’t assume someone’s pronouns have changed based on their appearance or your perception of them. Respecting and remembering pronouns is your responsibility.

If you forget someone’s pronoun. Respectfully ask for their pronouns, “Can you remind me what your pronouns are?” Asking is always better than assuming or guessing and shows your respect for their gender identity.

If you use the incorrect pronoun. When you use the incorrect pronoun for someone, they may feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, or alienated. Apologize and correct yourself right away. “I’m sorry, I should have said X.” Check in with the person in private later. “I believe I misused your pronoun earlier. Can you remind me of your pronouns?”