

# The Sex Matters guide to...

## Pronouns at work

### Summary

**Do I have to state my pronouns? No. Do I have to use other people's? Maybe.**

Personal pronouns are everyday words, which generally refer to people's sex. But some people have started use them to convey ideas and beliefs about gender identity.

The contradictory beliefs that everyone has a gender identity which should override their physical sex and that sex is real, binary, immutable and important have both been found to attract protection from discrimination in law. Employers should accommodate staff and customers with different beliefs, not force staff to share one particular belief or its practices.

### 'State your pronouns'

*Staff are asked to include pronouns in email signatures, bios, name badges and forms, or at the start of meetings.*

It is not necessary for people to 'state their pronouns' in order to facilitate polite and respectful interaction. So this is not a practical request to help people figure out who to call 'he' and who to call 'she' but a ritual associated with belief in gender identity.

There have been no legal cases yet. But we think that employees are entitled to decline to take part in this ritual, and to be protected from discrimination, harassment and victimisation if they do so.

### What should you do?

**Decline in a low-key manner.** You do not need to explain why. Simply refrain from stating your pronouns and if asked why, say something bland like 'It is not a practice I follow'. Employers should recognise that cultural rituals should not be imposed on people, and a simple 'No thank you' should be accepted without question. **You do not have to go further than this.** But if you want to, you might like to share our briefing with your employer.

## Find out if it is a voluntary or mandatory practice

If your organisation is promoting pronoun declaration, agrees that it is voluntary and recognises that it is a matter of belief, it should equally support promotion of the views of those who do not share the belief. You could ask that training and internal communications include both points of view.

If you feel under pressure to state your pronouns, ask for confirmation that stating pronouns is purely a voluntary act by individuals. You should not face pervasive, severe, and persistent hostility for declining to participate, or be marked down in performance assessments for not doing so. If you do, you should consider bringing a grievance.

## 'Use preferred pronouns'

*An employee asks people to refer to them with different pronouns from those they would naturally use; and an employer seeks to enforce this.*

The question of when this is reasonable is not straightforward. It is difficult to avoid using correctly sexed pronouns; but not creating a hostile environment for a transgender person is a legitimate aim for a policy. There is no case law from the UK yet.

In many situations it is necessary to acknowledge the sex of a person – for their own safety, the safety and dignity of others, or some other reason in their interest, the public interest or sound management. This might not be with pronouns but other clear words such as 'male' and 'female' which are sometimes labelled as 'misgendering'.

Employees may be willing to use preferred pronouns in spite of their beliefs, or prefer to avoid sexed language completely. But employers must note that this does not constitute consent to share changing, washing, toilet or sleeping accommodation with a member of the opposite sex.

If preferred pronouns are an official policy, the employer should consider how this interacts with their obligation to avoid belief discrimination and sex discrimination, and to allow freedom of association (including of single-sex groups).

Preferred pronoun policies can also be a safeguarding issue. Many schools are changing children's names and pronouns without telling parents. We advise against this. Keeping secrets with children is a safeguarding risk, and schools should work with families. Staff may want to raise, escalate or act on safeguarding concerns.