



**Gender** *Demographic Series*

Best practice  
recommendations for  
multi-country work.

## Introduction

ESOMAR, through its Professional Standards Committee, is developing recommendations on demographic best practice to address inconsistencies that create barriers and inefficiencies in the exchange and evaluation of international data and present an inaccurate and sometimes distorted view. These recommendations, founded on evidence-based best practice, are designed to improve quality standards and facilitate the rapid creation of multi-country research projects and surveys to better provide meaningful global/regional results that can be more easily compared from one project to another. The objective is, therefore, to describe demographic groups in as globally consistent a way as possible and to develop a common demographic structure. The work has been carried out by a dedicated expert workgroup, validated by the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee and a Client Sounding Board. This initiative is endorsed by the ESOMAR Council. Details of the project, its governance and its background are available in a dedicated area on the ESOMAR site. The project deals with each demographic in turn and will update the material on a regular basis. This recommendation covers gender as a topic.

The recommendation on Gender covers an area that is particularly culturally sensitive and dynamic in nature. ESOMAR believes that it is important to move away from binary data collection approaches in any market where it is both legally and socially acceptable to do so to ensure that Market Research is both inclusive and responsive to changes in society. The Demographic workgroup will update this guidance as frequently as is required to take account of the developing nature of this subject.

## Context for gender

There is recognition that the concept of gender is dynamic, which poses particular challenges for researchers. We note that there are substantial differences; both across, and sometimes within geographies, age groups and subsets of populations. Our approach is to find a question that will work for basic research needs and work across modes and internationally. A more detailed question may be required for specific research topics, for example, medical or LGBTQ+ focused studies.

People often use the terms sex and gender interchangeably, and they are not always distinguished, even in legal documents. Although connected, the terms are not equivalent, so it is important to understand the difference. The distinction between sex and gender is very important for those who have a gender or lived experience that does not align with their sex registered at birth.

Sex is assigned to a person on the basis of 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, on some occasions, may include intersex.

Gender is often expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity; gender is largely culturally determined and is assumed from the sex assigned at birth. Usually, parents/guardians assume their child's gender aligns with the sex at birth and it is only as a child develops that they may realise that they do not identify in that way and identify or express themselves differently.

The majority of the population is cisgender: their gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth, and they may not understand the importance of the distinction between sex and gender. For those who are transgender, where their gender is not the same as or does not sit comfortably with the sex they were assigned at birth, the difference is very important.

It is necessary to distinguish between gender and sexual orientation, which are often incorrectly conflated. They are two distinct but related aspects of self. Gender is personal, how someone sees themselves, while sexual orientation is interpersonal, concerned with to whom someone is emotionally, romantically and/or sexually attracted.

For some types of research, there may be a need for more detailed information. For example, within medical research, there may be the need to ask about biological sex or ask more specifically about a participant's body to understand if someone should qualify or not as a research participant. For more specific research, asking about someone's gender expression or the pronouns they choose, could be useful. Care should be taken to minimise the personal data collected; all questions should be relevant and required for the research being carried out. For most research asking about gender will be sufficient and less intrusive, however it should be asked in an inclusive way.

Increasingly we're seeing more distinction, especially amongst the LGBTQ+ community, that man/woman is being used to refer to gender, with male/female being considered to refer to sex. However, this is not yet a consistent view across society. Using man and woman as the options can be clearer for the trans community, but can complicate asking about gender across different age groups, as they are not age-neutral words. Our guidance is to use male/female in the English language as this remains consistent with census terminology where gender has been asked and reflects the current global evidence base. In other languages, we suggest that, where possible, the census terminology is followed and if gender has not been included in a census, that the terminology remain consistent with what has generally been used for market research studies.



When asking multiple questions, including sex and gender, it may be preferable to change the question wording from “Are you” to “What is your gender?” for clarity. Local guidance should be taken as in some markets the concept of gender is not understood in the same way it is in English. For example, there may not be a differentiation between sex and gender, and the concept of gender may not exist, or gender may be considered to apply to objects but not people.

## General recommended approach for the measurement of gender.

### *1. Acknowledge that gender is not a binary concept for some people.*

**Why?** Some people may identify in a different way to male or female or have a gender that is fluid.

### *2. Be mindful that not everyone’s sex and gender will be the same.*

**Why?** Sex is recorded at birth, and gender is assumed to be the same. However, some people realise that they do not identify that way and express their gender differently.

### *3. Do not ask participants their gender if the information required is already held by the sample provider and can be appended to your survey, noting that it is helpful that panellists can update their own status information on a dynamic basis for this specific topic.*

**Why?** This is in order that research participants are not repeatedly asked the same information which leads to participant friction.

# How best to word the gender question

## “Are you”

**Avoid:** using sentences that may not translate well or words that may not be received well, for example, “describes”.

**Why?** It is not that someone describes themselves that way. They are that way.

## How to best design the gender questions?

Given that asking a non-binary question could be considered sensitive to some populations, we recommend a core question that can be adapted if needed.

Our recommended core non-binary question that could be used in any country where it is considered safe for research participants to answer this question is:

**a) Are you**

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

In countries where it may not be acceptable or safe to ask a non-binary question, we recommend making the binary question optional by adding a “Prefer not to answer” option:

**b) Are you**

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to answer

For countries that are more accepting, or where they have well-known terminology for other genders, for example, the term “non-binary” is becoming more prevalent in some markets. This could be included in the answer list in addition to “another gender”.

It is recommended that where local market research association guidance on asking about gender exists, it should be consulted.

We recommend that this list be kept short to avoid being too invasive and difficult to translate. If a longer list is used, consideration would be needed as to whether research participants should be able to multicode. Our recommendation is to keep the question short to allow the question to remain single-coded.

Where more detailed information is required, for example, for a study among the LGBT population or a study on a related topic, the question could be designed with multiple options and/or with a self-describe option. However, this is not in the scope of this recommendation, and privacy legislation should be followed, as data collected on gender may be categorised as special category data if health information, for example, indicating reassignment, is disclosed.

Traditionally in market research, when listing male/female for sex and gender questions, male has come first. We recommend that these answer options be listed alphabetically or be randomised to treat them equally.

## Are there any legal, regional, or country-level considerations relevant to minors to be aware of when asking about gender?

### Yes

#### Restrictions on asking these questions

- In some countries, it may not be safe, legal, or acceptable for a research participant to identify as something other than male or female.
- Specific consideration should be given to interviewing children and vulnerable/at-risk populations or asking the parent or guardian about their children.
- If there is an open-ended question or specific answers that may indicate a medical procedure, this could require legal/privacy opt-ins.

In adopting this recommendation, take account of the privacy and cultural issues in the geographies in which you are administering the questionnaire. Further information on this is available on the Demographics page of the ESOMAR site.

When administering these questions amongst children or vulnerable groups, users may find the ESOMAR/GRBN Guideline on Duty of Care; Protecting Research Data Subjects from Harm to be helpful together with the ESOMAR/GRBN Guideline on Research and Data analytics with Children, Young People and Other Vulnerable Individuals.

**Does this same advice apply to online and offline methodology?**

Yes, though there are some considerations when conducting face-to-face interviews to ensure that interviewers ask this question and don't make an assumption about a person's gender based on their appearance or for telephone interviewers not to make an assumption based on their voice. The survey design approach should take this into consideration.

## Recommended additional wording

**Add a "Why are we asking this question?"** information button option for online data collection and spoken/visual/written equivalent for face-to-face or CATI-based data collection approaches.

It is recommended as best practice, and in some countries, this may be necessary, to offer an explanation about the reason for asking what many people may consider to be a sensitive, demographic question, such as a person's gender.

**Example explanation:**

"The reason this question is being asked is to ensure that the answers to this survey can represent the viewpoints of people from all genders."

Add a "Why are we providing an option for "Another gender"?" information button/equivalent option.

**Example explanation:**

"The reason this is included is to be respectful and inclusive, allowing those that don't identify as one of the binary options of entirely male or entirely female a response option that they can select".

If asking about both sex and gender, it is recommended that an explanation of the difference between the two terms be provided to the research participant, and it may be helpful to be specific in the question wording by asking, for example, "What is your sex?" and "What is your gender?"

## Different advice for survey vs registration research processes

Please note that this advice is for asking about gender in general research and surveys. However, when research participants are registering to be on a panel, if a universal question is required then we would recommend Option “b” on page 4 to ensure acceptability in all markets, however it can be adjusted by market where possible. Given that gender can be fluid for some people, we recommend that panel information be updated at least once a year.

## Points on translation

Specific care should be taken with international research to ensure that the language used can be translated and understood in the market. For example, “Another gender” is more easily translatable than “non-binary”, where the terminology is not always widely understood. In some countries, ‘gender’ may be understood, but there may not be a straightforward translation, so there might be a requirement for a more detailed explanation or using a local word that is more fitting.

## Points on census or reference data with respect to quota setting and targeting

With the introduction of the non-binary gender option, one challenge for researchers is to know how to weight this population. Currently the number of research participants who claim to be in the non-binary category is very low, however this is something that is expected to increase as it becomes more accepted in society. It is already apparent that there are higher proportions of the younger age populations that don’t identify as either male or female, and it’s possible that people will become increasingly confident to openly identify this way. We recommend that particular thought is given to the topic of usable levels of data where base sizes are small.

At the publication date of this guidance, census data is available in Canada and England and Wales, and there are plans to publish within the census in Australia and New Zealand, but the information is currently patchy and inconsistent between geographies.

It is important to state that there is a clear difference between what is **inclusive** and what is **representative** in market research. To be “inclusive” is to ensure we aim to include as much of the population as possible without placing unnecessary barriers to exclude or discriminate against any person who wishes to take part in a survey.



Representation, from a research perspective, is how we design samples that reflect the views of the target population that we are measuring. We believe that in the case of gender, there should be an inclusive approach to quota setting and weighting. The sample selection approach should be sufficiently flexible so that non-binary groups are not excluded.

To take an inclusive approach, non-binary groups should be included in the sample and routing of a survey and not be screened out on gender. We recommend that non-binary groups are given a weight of 1 for gender unless a robust data source is available from the country indicating otherwise. It is recommended that researchers consult the question wording of the country census if gender is asked, as using the same terminology will ensure weighting to the population is more accurate.

## Some terminology that may be helpful:

**Sex:** Assigned to a person at birth based on biological characteristics. Sex is usually male or female and, on some occasions, may include intersex.

**Gender:** Gender is usually culturally determined and often expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity.

**Cisgender:** Someone whose gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Gender expression:** How a person decides to express their gender identity through, for example, their name, pronouns, clothing, hairstyle, behaviour, voice, or body features.

**Trans/Transgender:** An umbrella term 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 gender identities that are not solely male or female – identities that are outside the gender binary.

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

## Industry validation

This recommendation has been prepared by a dedicated working group and validated by the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee and a Client Sounding Board. For further details on the executives involved, see the ESOMAR site page on the Demographic Best Practice project.

ESOMAR and its Professional Standards Committee would like to thank Trixie Cartwright for her extensive work with the Demographic Working Group in drafting this best practice document.

### **The research that supports these recommendations**

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> **NOTE** this is a primary source for the development of this guidance.

Individuals and Groups in numerous countries have been consulted during the work to understand the nature of this topic and the development of this best practice document. This includes 24 countries in Europe, 2 in North America, 16 in MENA, 14 in Asia Pacific, 19 in Central and South America and 9 in Africa.

### **The following references and sources have also been used in developing this document.**

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<https://www.ranker.com/list/third-genders-around-the-world/rachel-souerbry>

## Industry validation

This recommendation has been prepared by a dedicated Project Team and validated by the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee and a Client Sounding Board (see following pages).

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