

LGBTQ+ History Month

Beyond the Binary

A binary is an idea where you have only two options, like a light switch being on or off, or the classic “you’re either with us, or you’re against us” line, or right or wrong, good or bad, and so on. Most binaries have exceptions, and even more of them aren’t really binaries at all, with enormous grey areas and room for debate in things like right or wrong, good or bad. You can even get dimmer switches for your lights at home; we’re truly living in the future.

So how about gender? Man and woman, Adam and Eve, dead simple?

Well maybe not! This thing called gender has endless different expressions and forms, and we see them across time, all over the world. Earlier in the month we spoke about Hijra, a third gender going back some 2000 years across the Indian subcontinent, legally recognised in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan today. In native Hawaiian and Tahitian culture there are Māhū, a third gender with distinct cultural and spiritual roles. In the Philippines we have a children’s rhyme listing four traditional Philippine genders, “girl, boy, baklâ, tomboy”. The idea that gender is just male and female, is not some fixed truth but just one version in many.



Sam Smith, UK singer songwriter, is non-binary

In the LGBTQ+ community the most common terms for these people are non-binary or genderqueer. Often non-binary is used as an umbrella term for a large variety of identities that fall outside of man or woman. Non-binary (sometimes shortened to NB, or enby) people will often use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to themselves, like they/them. Some people find this confusing as usually when we say they or them we’re talking about a group of people, rather than a single person, but it’s actually something we do naturally when talking about a person whose gender we do not know. For example, say you’re at home and the doorbell rings, a housemate answers it and shouts upstairs to you “*there’s someone at the door for you!*”, you might say “*what do they want?*”, and it would make perfect sense! In 2019 Merriam-Webster dictionary chose the singular “they” as their word of the year, and we even see it used to refer to individuals as far back as Shakespeare. Not all non-binary people use they/them pronouns, they may use a mix of he, she, they or more. If you are ever unsure how to talk to someone, politely and discreetly asking them what their pronouns are is fine.



Legal recognition of third gender or non-binary gender is happening sporadically around the world, in addition to countries that have long recognised third genders, some Western countries are taking measures to be more inclusive in how they record and recognise gender. In the UK in 2020 an employment tribunal found that a non-binary individual was protected under the 2010 Equality Act, the first precedent in

this country that non-binary people have legal protection.

I, Isaac, vice-chair, I'm non-binary, described lovingly by the MK Citizen as "a they". I prefer they/them pronouns but don't mind he/him if you don't know me!

If you have any questions or issues relating to any of this please contact the pride network at Pride@mkuh.nhs.uk, and if not, here's a joke:

How do non-binary samurai defeat their opponents? They slash them.