

Tim Davie
Director General
BBC
Broadcasting House
Portland Place
London W1A 1AA
By email

21 September 2023

Dear Mr Davie

SEX AND GENDER IDENTITY: PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE

We are writing to share with you the results of polling we recently commissioned to test how well people understand what the terms ‘transgender woman’ and ‘trans woman’ tell them about a person’s sex.

The findings show that there is substantial confusion about these terms, especially ‘trans woman’. We believe this raises questions about how these have been adopted as everyday terms, requiring little additional explanation.

We are only in a position to fund this initial exploratory research, but we hope these findings will encourage relevant organisations to undertake their own further research to inform their work.

Background

Terms such as ‘transgender woman’ and ‘trans man’ have become standard terms, widely used in the media, polling and in public policy contexts, such as health information. Sometimes, these terms are used with some explicit description of what they mean, in terms of what sex a person is. More often, such additional information has to be gleaned from other references in the text or from accompanying photographs. Sometimes there may be no further explanation at all. Even where there is more information in the supporting text, the use of these terms in headlines is almost always free-standing.

Clarity about what these terms mean is important when they are used in any context where sex is relevant, such as discussion about access to single-sex spaces and services, participation in sports, or reporting of sex-patterned offending behaviour. It is, however, unclear how well this language is understood by the wider population. We were not aware of any published work exploring how well-understood these terms actually are. To explore this further, we therefore commissioned Survation to undertake public opinion polling.

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Survation polling

We polled a UK-wide sample.¹ In mid-June this year we asked:

When you hear someone described as a transgender woman, what do you think this means?

- Someone registered as male/a boy at birth²
- Someone registered as female/a girl at birth
- Don't know

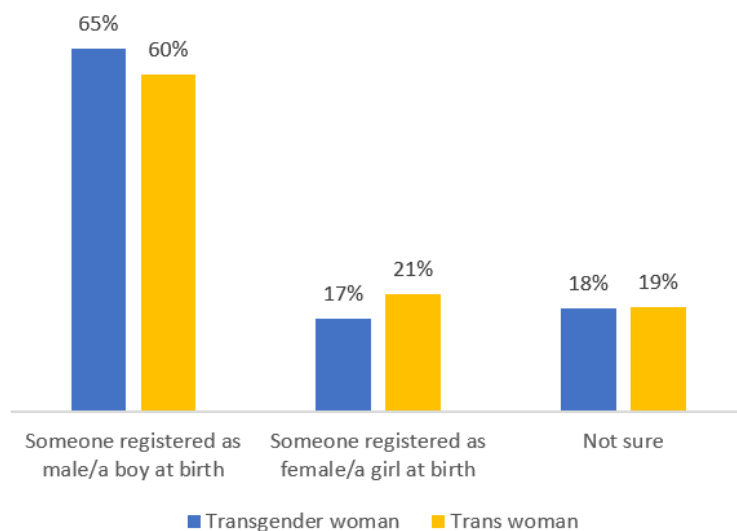
We then asked a separate sample of people in late June the same question in relation to the term 'trans woman' ('not sure' was used in place of 'don't know'), to see if there was any difference in how well the two terms were understood. We asked the questions in two separate polls, to look at the understanding of each term independently.

We deliberately did not ask what assumptions people made about what, if any, physical procedures a person had undergone. Our focus here was on people's understanding of how these terms relate to sex, as observed and recorded at birth.

We focussed on 'transgender/trans woman', because these terms are the most relevant to current discussions of who can access women's services, spaces and activities. Our findings however suggest that the media and others should invest in further polling here, looking at 'transgender/trans man'.

Results

The full results are [here](#). These show both terms were correctly understood by less than two-thirds of those asked. The remaining responses split roughly evenly between those who misunderstood, and those who were not sure.



Results for the two terms were broadly similar, although 'trans woman' was somewhat less likely to be understood correctly and more likely to be actively misunderstood.

¹ Information on the polling methodology is included in the full results, available [here](#). Survation follows established methods to obtain a representative sample of the population.

² We used 'registered at birth' to keep the question as unambiguous and free of contentious terms as possible. For the same reason, we asked only about a person's sex as registered at birth, not what the term meant in relation to their present identity. The ordering of response options was randomised, to avoid ordering bias.

Looking at how the results break down further by sub-groups of the population, the patterns become messier and more different for the two terms. The results for these smaller sub-groups need to be treated with some caution but are worth attention (some columns below do not sum to 100% due to rounding). More detailed results showing demographic breaks are set out in the Annex.

Accuracy matters

The findings suggest that media outlets, policy makers, and polling companies all need to anticipate relatively high levels of misunderstanding and confusion when they use these terms.

Using these terms, without spelling out what they mean for a person's sex as matter of course, will leave a large minority of people at best uncertain. At worst, they will have a back-to-front understanding of what they are being told or asked. 'Trans woman' appears more likely than 'transgender woman' to be misunderstood, but both have problems.

This evidently matters in any context where sex is relevant to what is being discussed, for example in relation to policy or the law. It also matters in relation to data collection, and public understanding of what is being asked.

We note that IPSO recently issued new guidance on how to report issues relating to sex and gender identity. This includes a section on Clause 1 of the Editor's Code (Accuracy) which states:

'Accurate presentation of policy or guidance is vital to keeping the public well-informed. Journalists and editors must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading, or distorted information when reporting on changes to policy or guidance relating to gender identity and the transgender community.'

[Guidance for Journalists and Editors on Sex and Gender Identity](#)

IPSO 28 July 2023: 4

It invites publications to consider

'Is the terminology or statistics being used likely to create a misleading or inaccurate impression?'

[Guidance for Journalists and Editors on Sex and Gender Identity](#)

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The guidance does not cite any research into how terms are understood by audiences and does not mention whether any new work has been commissioned on that.

The results of our polling show that to avoid confusion and misunderstanding, those engaged with public communication in any form need to spell out clearly what sex of person is being referred to, in any context where sex matters.

We hope you will therefore take these findings into account in making choices about the use of language in this area, and consider commissioning further research, to understand better how language here may clarify or confuse.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Lucy Hunter Blackburn

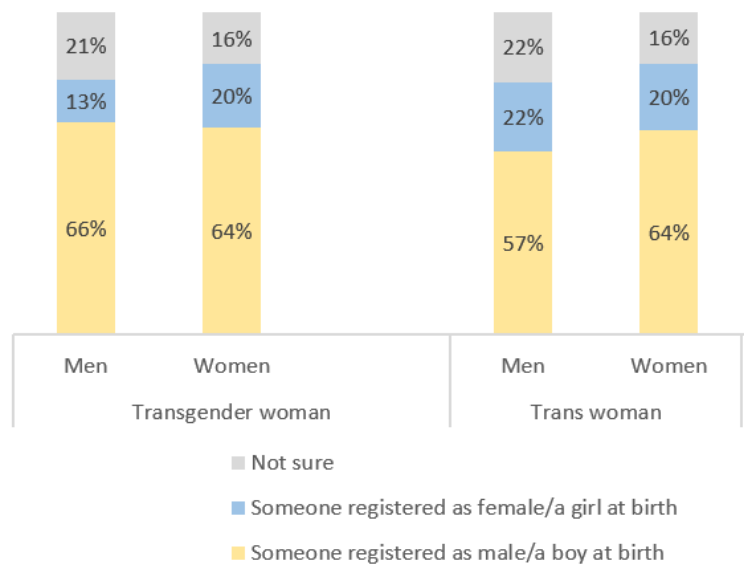
Lisa Mackenzie

Dr Kath Murray

Annex: demographic breaks

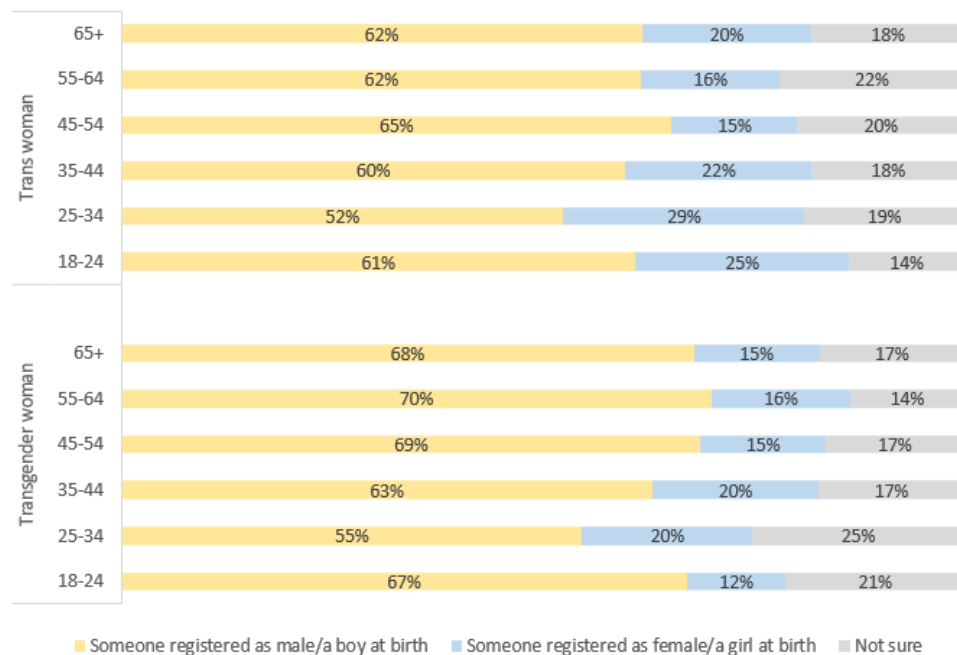
Sex

Both sexes were more likely to understand 'transgender woman' correctly, but the difference in results between the terms was very small for women. For men, the understanding of 'transgender woman' was much higher, and they were also much less likely to *misunderstand* that term, than 'trans woman'.



Age

Those over 45 were more likely to understand both terms accurately than those in younger groups. Younger age groups are generally assumed to be more engaged with issues of gender identity, so this finding is surprising.

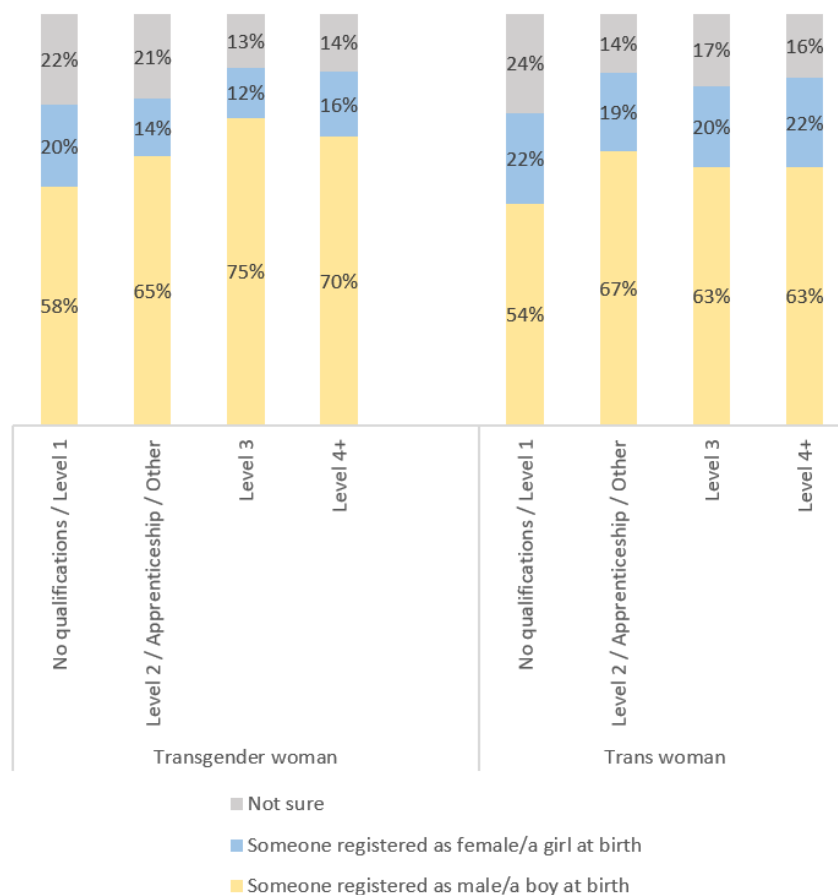


Strikingly, of those aged 25-34, barely half gave the correct response, for both terms. Well over one-quarter (29%) of that group thought a ‘trans woman’ described someone who had been registered female/a girl at birth. As this effect was seen for both terms, separately sampled, it seems likely to be a real population effect. The youngest age group records substantially better understanding of these terms than those aged 25-34. There is scope for further testing to understand what might explain this effect.

Educational level

Neither income nor level of educational qualification were simple predictors of accurate understanding. However, those with no or the most basic level of qualifications were most likely to have difficulty with this language, with ‘trans woman’ causing most confusion. Its meaning was clear only to just over half (54%) of that group.

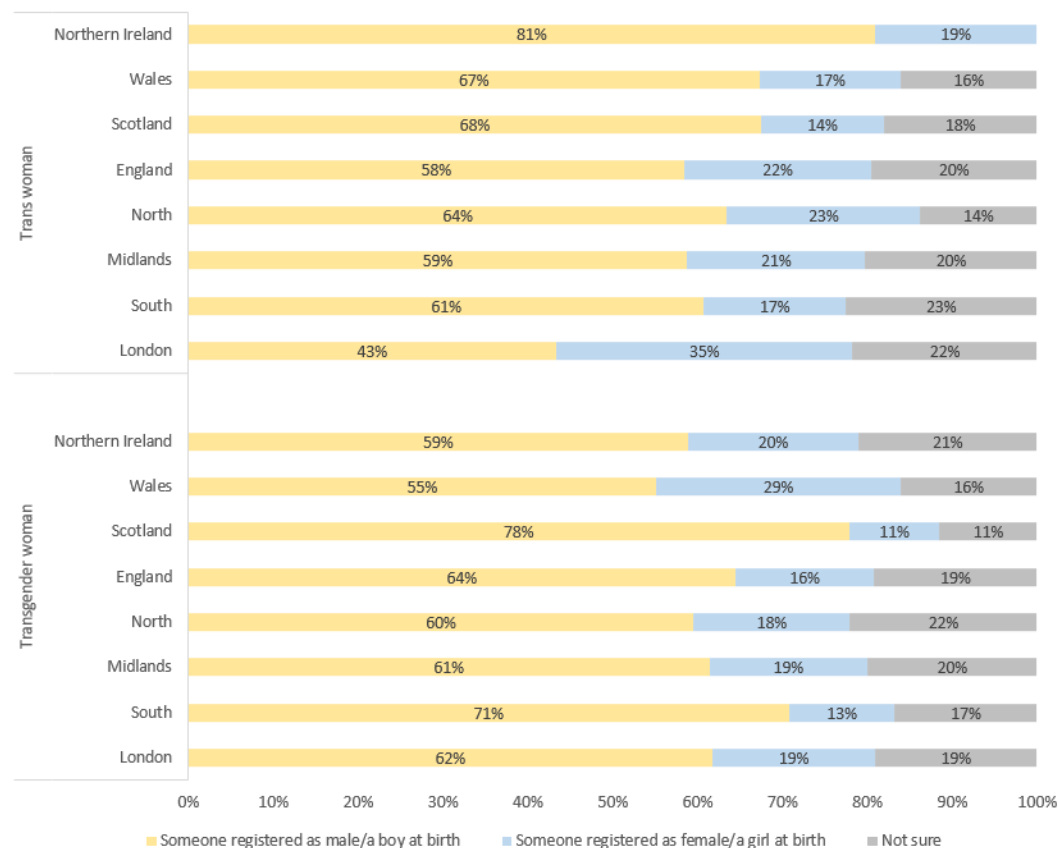
For both terms, those with Level 4+ (HE) qualifications did less well than at least one of the Level 3 (A-level equivalent) or Level 2 (GCSE-equivalent at higher grades) groups: see [here](#) for level definitions.



Region

The largest variation was by region. The lowest accurate response rate of any group was well under half (43%), in London, for ‘trans woman’; over one-third of this group (35%) gave the wrong answer. This may possibly be connected to higher numbers who have English as a second language (see [Biggs, 2023](#) for a similar hypothesis in relation to the gender identity question in the 2021 England and Wales census).

This deserves further consideration, alongside the results for the group with no or limited qualifications, as a likely [plain English](#) issue. Women with lower levels of qualifications or more limited language skills will already tend to be more socially and economically disadvantaged: their understanding of what they are being told about the operation of services and spaces appears especially likely to be affected by using this language.



The Scottish sub-sample, compared to the English regional and Welsh samples, was more likely to understand both terms correctly and least likely to misunderstand either. This may reflect the prominence of the debate around legal gender recognition reform in Scotland and, perhaps even more, high-profile coverage of the [Adam Graham/Isla Bryson](#) case.

A similar effect was seen with a recent [UK-wide parliamentary petition](#) seeking support for making clear the meaning of ‘sex’ in the Equality Act 2010, where Scottish constituencies showed much the highest rate of support. (An [alternative petition](#) arguing against any change to the Act did not however show a similar pattern.) The outlying Northern Irish result for ‘trans woman’ seems most likely to be an effect of the very small sub-sample.