Gender Identity: Student Midwifery Beyond the Binary

Mx Ash Bainbridge (they/them) - First-year Student Midwife, University of Worcester
Mx Rowan March (they/them) - First-year Student Midwife, University of Surrey

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Summary

The midwifery workforce is diversifying and is now home to more gender non-conforming midwives (0.4%) than male midwives (0.3%). In this commentary, Ash Bainbridge and Rowan March share their experiences of midwifery training as gender non-conforming people. They shed light on how healthcare students and professionals can improve the experiences of their gender non-conforming colleagues and discuss the importance of inclusive language.

Can you explain your gender identities?

Rowan: I go by ‘non-binary’ – someone who identifies with a gender outside of male/man/boy and female/woman/girl. I feel this label fits me best. My gender is somewhere in the middle of male and female, but it isn’t static.

Ash: Like Rowan, I understand gender as a spectrum and a person’s gender identity can fall anywhere in relation to this spectrum. My identity is agender, which means I do not identify as a man, woman, or anything in between. As such, I am referred to as a person and my pronouns are gender neutral (they/them/their). Here is an example of my pronouns in use: ‘Ash is a student midwife in their first year of training. They are passionate about informed choice and person-centred care. Do you know them?’

Why have you changed your name?

Rowan: My deadname (the name I was born with and no longer use) was very feminine and I never really associated with it. People would often call my deadname and I wouldn’t realise they were talking to me! Being addressed by my deadname makes me feel nauseous; choosing a new name that I felt comfortable with made me so much happier. I decided to change my name legally before beginning midwifery training.
I felt like I was moving into a new, better, phase of my life and wanted to bring my identity with me.

**Ash:** Unlike Rowan, I have not yet changed my name legally. I have already experienced one name change (my married surname) and found this tricky. I chose to live with my new name before making any formal changes. My old name was weighed down with expectations, many of which were rooted in gender. Selecting a new, gender-neutral name has given me the freedom to shake off these expectations and present myself exactly how I feel – a name with connotations of nature and a gothic edge!

What value do gender non-conforming students add to the profession?

**Rowan:** We add different perspectives. Not everyone who falls pregnant and gives birth identifies as a woman. Being visible as someone other than a woman in a traditionally female-led environment may help others feel at ease with revealing their own identities, or simply feel reassured that they are in a safe space with us.

**Ash:** I agree. Male and female midwives are important, therefore, gender non-conforming ones are, too. From a perinatal service user’s perspective, care for gender non-conforming people can appear discriminatory and unsafe; a midwife is ‘with woman’ providing ‘woman-centred care’ in ‘maternity’ services. By sharing our identities, Rowan, myself and others, are showing gender non-conforming birthing people that members of the LGBTQ+ community are present. We share a universal experience of living beyond a gender binary and our experiences of this are unique. We understand body dysphoria,
which some gender non-conforming people experience, and its potential impact on a pregnant person’s choices. We will always ask, for example, which words are most appropriate when referring to a pregnant person’s anatomy: some will want to breastfeed, others chestfeed, and others not mention bodyfeeding at all. In the UK, more than a third of trans* people have avoided accessing healthcare services for fear of prejudice. In a bid to evade discrimination, invasive examinations and observations, some people even choose to birth alone. As healthcare professionals, we have a responsibility to ensure that all birthing people are, and believe they are, included, well cared for and safe.

What are your most positive experiences so far as gender non-conforming student midwives?

Rowan: For me, I would say how supportive everyone has been. I decided to start university by not hiding who I am. Yes, people slip up, but I can tell that my cohort and lecturers are all trying! My personal tutor even spoke to the university’s diversity team after I spoke with her so that she could have a better idea of what being non-binary means!

Ash: Hearing on the grapevine that students in my cohort are advocating for gender inclusivity. They have defended using ‘birthing people’ as well as ‘women’ in their summative work, are educating supervisors about correct pronoun usage and challenging assumptions and inaccuracies when appropriate and safe to do so. They are striving for change as allies.

What challenges have you faced?

☐ Male
☐ Female
☑ Non-binary

Rowan: Two particularly stressful challenges stand out for me. First, I was unsure if I would be able to go on placement on time. The online Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) forms do not cater for the title ‘Mx’ (pronounced mix) printed on my ID forms, leaving me struggling to source a paper alternative. Second, I was provided with a women’s uniform where I had ordered a men’s size. Getting your first uniform is ordinarily an exciting part of being a student midwife, and I felt so disappointed and upset. There is an ongoing struggle of deciding whether to be ‘out’ as non-binary; not knowing how people will respond or if they will be unpleasant. I also really wish people would stop referring to the cohort as “ladies”!

Ash: Deciding whether to wear a bra or chest compressor for long shifts, feeling guilty for using gender-neutral toilets on campus as they are also reserved for disabled users, trying on my uniform with my peers when I was wearing a chest compressor and felt too self-conscious to undress, working through prescribed reading written by transphobic authors, and feeling pressured to discuss my gender identity when I do not feel comfortable doing so. The most frustrating challenge I repeatedly face is being reassured that I ‘need
not worry because they have attended LGBTQ+ inclusivity training’ – yet within moments, I am called a ‘lady’ and my pronouns are forgotten. Inclusivity is not a ‘tick box’ exercise. Inclusivity requires consistent learning, empathy, consideration and action.

How can cisgender* colleagues help? (*someone who identifies with their gender assigned at birth)

Rowan: Including pronouns anywhere your name features is a good place to start (email signatures, social media bios etc). If only trans* and non-binary people include pronouns, this signature becomes an identifier of being LGBTQ+. You could even get a badge with pronouns on and wear it on a lanyard or uniform to help normalise this practice. If you are not misusing pronouns intentionally, it is not an issue. I sometimes struggle to conjugate my own pronouns! ‘Trans*’ and ‘queer’ are words that should be used with caution. Some people have had these terms used as transphobic slurs against them or may prefer not to use them for various reasons. Always ask, just in case.

Ash: If you are unsure what or how to use someone’s pronouns – just ask! Mistakes happen and, when they inevitably do, just correct yourself and move on.

Any final bits of advice?

Rowan: Gender is a very individual experience, so do not generalise based on someone else with a similar label. Cisgender colleagues should also never ask invasive questions about gender, transition, sexual preferences or how a person presents. If someone wants to share private details with you, they will.

Ash: In practice, gender non-conforming students and midwives may need support in situations that demand ‘code switching’. Code switching is when speech and mannerisms change to put forward a different identity at a given moment in time. Two examples requiring code switching are discussing pink and blue clothing with parents for whom these colours are significant and declaring the sex of the
baby at birth as an important moment for families. Cisgender colleagues can assist by leading these conversations and providing time for gender non-conforming colleagues to process when working in spaces of varying approaches to sex and gender. TSM

Recommended resources

Pronoun acrylic lapel pins:

Rise Up Midwife
https://www.riseupmidwife.com/
$11.50

Books:

Gender: A Graphic Guide
Where’s the Mother?: Stories from a Transgender Dad
Portraying Pregnancy: from Holbein to Social Media

Film

Seahorse: The Dad Who Gave Birth
2019, Jeanie Finlay, BBC, Vimeo
Our Baby: A Modern Miracle
2020, Gussy Sakula-Barry G, Channel 4 4OD.

Workshop

The Queer Birth Club
AJ Silver, https://queerbirthclub.co.uk/

References


