# New Gender Options for Facebook Users

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MENLO PARK, Calif. (AP) — With a click of a cursor, Jay Brown in Cheverly, Md., went from Male to Trans Male. A few states away, Debon Garrigues of Asheville, N.C., switched from Male to Neutral. In San Francisco, Marilyn Roxie, formerly Female, chose three: Androgynous, Transgender and Genderqueer.

Across the country Thursday, news swept through the transgender community that social media giant Facebook had added a customizable option with about 50 different terms people can use to identify their gender as well as three preferred pronoun choices: him, her or them. And one after another, they made their changes in a quiet revolution of sorts.

"For me, this is about much more than a button on a monitor," Garrigues said. "This encourages people to think outside the binary spectrum. It means I don't have to try to fit in the wrong boxes."

For many others, the change went unnoticed — or too far.

"Of course Facebook is entitled to manage its wildly popular site as it sees fit, but here is the bottom line: It's impossible to deny the biological reality that humanity is divided into two halves - male and female," said Jeff Johnston, an issues analyst for Focus on the Family, an influential national religious organization based in Colorado Springs, Colo. "Those petitioning for the change insist that there are an infinite number of genders, but just saying it doesn't make it so. That said, we have a great deal of compassion for those who reject their biological sex and believe they are the opposite sex."

Facebook said the changes, shared with The Associated Press before the launch, initially cover the company's 159 million monthly users in the U.S. and are aimed at giving people more choices in how they describe themselves, such as androgynous, bi-gender, intersex, gender fluid or transsexual.

"There's going to be a lot of people for whom this is going to mean nothing, but for the few it does impact, it means the world," said Facebook software engineer Brielle Harrison, who worked on the project and is herself undergoing gender transformation, from male to female. On Thursday, while watchdogging the software for any problems, she said she was also changing her Facebook identity from Female to TransWoman.

Facebook, which has 1.23 billion active monthly users around the world, also allows them to keep their gender identity private and will continue to do so. The company does not routinely publish data about users, and had no early figures about people changing their gender identity or leaving Facebook on Thursday.

The Williams Institute, a think tank based at the University of California, Los Angeles, estimates there are at least 700,000 individuals in the U.S. who identify as transgender, an umbrella term that includes people who live as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth.

The change at Facebook drew dozens of appreciative postings on the company's diversity website, although some pointed out the need to make relationships gender neutral, rather than using terms such as son or daughter. Others asked for sexual orientation options. The company said they were already working on it.

The move by Facebook represents a basic and yet significant form of recognition of the nation's growing transgender rights movement, which has been spurred by veteran activists and young people who identify as transgender at younger ages. The Human Rights Campaign last year found that 10 percent of the 10,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender youths it surveyed used "other" or wrote in their own gender terms.

Blogger and computer coder Meitar Moscovitz, in Santa Fe, N.M., was "underwhelmed."

"This isn't about Facebook being inclusive," he said. "It's about Facebook making sure people remain ignorant of exactly that facet; that they are categorizing you anyway. The more information you give Facebook, the more money you're worth to Facebook."

At this point, Facebook targets advertising according to male or female genders. For those who change to something neutral, ads will be targeted based on the pronoun they select for themselves. Unlike getting engaged or married, changing gender is not registered as a "life event" on the site and won't post on timelines. Therefore, Facebook said advertisers cannot target ads to those who declare themselves transgender or recently changed their gender.

Google+ offers male, female and "other" as choices, but transgender advocates said Facebook's many specific options puts the platform well ahead of any other online community. About 1 percent of Google+ users identify as other.

Transgender activist Nori Herras-Castaneda, a spokeswoman for the Billy DeFrank LGBT Community Center in San Jose, said her community has been waiting and lobbying both online and off for this to happen for a long time.

"We always talk about how gender is a spectrum," she said.

Facebook came up with its range of terms after consulting with leading gay and transgender activists, and the company plans to continue working with them. It plans to take the initiative global after working with activists abroad to come up with terms appropriate in other countries.

At Facebook, staffers said the expanded options were never questioned, from CEO Mark Zuckerberg on down.

"Really, there was no debate within Facebook about the social implications at all," said Alex Schultz, director of growth. "It was simple: Not allowing people to express something so fundamental is not really cool, so we did something."

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