

Gender and Sexual Orientation Terminology

The definitions provided are guidelines; they are not meant to be authoritative or immutable. Different people use them in different ways. Use them thoughtfully.

Gender and Sexual Orientation Concepts

Biological Sex/Assigned Sex: “Sex” refers to someone’s body. The physiological and anatomical characteristics of maleness and femaleness with which a person is born or that develop with physical maturity. These markers including internal and external reproductive organs, chromosomes, and hormone levels. Sometimes we say “assigned sex” to highlight how we are each assigned a sex category (male or female) on identification documents, beginning with the birth certificate, which can have legal implications later.

Gender Identity: “Gender identity” (or sometimes just “gender”) refers to a person’s self-identity. A person’s own understanding of themselves in terms of gendered categories like man and woman, boy and girl, transgender, genderqueer, and many others. How they feel inside or what they believe themselves to be.

Gender Expression: “Gender expression” refers to people’s appearance and behavior. People’s behaviors that convey something about their gender identity, or that others interpret as meaning something about their gender identity, including clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms, communication patterns, social roles, etc.

Gender-neutral: Inclusive of all genders; not gender-specific. A “gender neutral” restroom is one that everybody can use. It is not only for “gender-neutral” people.

Sexual Orientation: Sexual orientation describes a person’s romantic or erotic attraction, in terms of their own gender and the gender of their preferred partners. For example someone may be attracted to men, women, transgender people (or particular kinds of transgender people), or any combination. People of any gender may have any sexual orientation.

Identity Categories

Terms of self-identity are complicated. When talking about a particular individual, it’s best to use whichever terms that individual uses for themselves. Even so, keep in mind they may not use the term exactly as it’s defined here. When talking about a community or group of people, the definitions below should serve you.

Many of these words are sometimes used as nouns as well as adjectives, e.g. “transsexuals” as well as “transsexual people.” If you do not identify with a particular category, it’s best to stick to adjectives, and talk about “transsexual people,” “gay people,” etc. rather than “transsexuals” and “gays.”

GLBT / LGBT: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender. Also sometimes includes Q (queer, questioning), and I (intersex).

Gay (adj.): Describes men and women whose primary romantic and erotic attraction is to people of their same gender, i.e. men who are attracted to men and women who are attracted to women. Sometimes used to refer only to men.

Lesbian (adj.) (n.): Describes women whose primary romantic and erotic attraction is to other women.

Bisexual (adj.): Describes people who are attracted to both men and women.

Queer (adj.): An umbrella term describing a wide range of people who do not conform to heterosexual and/or gender norms; a reclaimed derogatory slur taken as a political term to unite people who are marginalized because of their non-conformity to dominant gender identities and/or heterosexuality. Sometimes used as a shortcut for LGBT. Other times used to distinguish politically queer people from more mainstream LGBT people. *Because of its origin as a derogatory slur, this term should be used with caution. If you're not queer, or for public communications, LGBT is usually more appropriate.*

Transgender (or sometimes just “trans”) (adj.) (1): An umbrella term used to describe a wide range of people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs significantly from what is expected of them in their culture based on anatomy, and for whom this difference is central to their identity and/or a significant part of their everyday experience. May include transsexuals, cross dressers, drag queens, drag kings, genderqueer people, and more. Not everyone who could be described as belonging to this broad category identifies as a transgender person (see Transgender (2) below).

Transgender (or sometimes just “trans”) (adj.) (2): Someone who identifies as a gender other than that assigned to them at birth based on their anatomy. For example, women who were assigned male at birth, men who were assigned female at birth, and people who identify as neither men nor women.

Transsexual (adj.): Usually, a person who experiences an intense, persistent, and long-term feeling that their body and assigned sex are at odds with their gender identity. Such individuals often (but not always) desire to change their bodies to bring them into alignment with their gender identities. This term comes from the medical establishment, and many people do not identify with it for that reason.

Genderqueer (adj.): Someone whose gender identity does not fit into either of the two culturally accepted gender categories (men and women).

FTM/ F2M/ FtM (adj.): Female-to-Male, or Female-toward-Male, trans person.

Trans man (or transgender man, or transsexual man) (n.): An FTM trans person.

MTF/ M2F/ MtF (adj.): Male-to-Female, or Male-toward-Female, trans person.

Trans woman (or transgender woman, or transsexual woman) (n.): An MtF trans person.

Cross Dresser (n.): A person who enjoys dressing in clothes typically associated with the other of the 2 socially sanctioned genders.

Drag (n.): The practice of dressing and acting in an exaggerated masculine or feminine way, usually playfully and for performance. Drag Queens are usually men who dress as women for performance; Drag Kings are usually women who dress as men for performance.

Cisgender (adj.): Non-trans. From a Latin-derived prefix meaning “on the same side,” as opposed to trans- which means “across” or “on the opposite side of.”

Intersex (adj.): Describes someone whose anatomy or physiology is not easily categorized as male or female. This may be noticed at birth, or may not be apparent until puberty. For more information regarding intersexuality, see www.isna.org.