

TERMINOLOGY GUIDANCE

Glossary of Terms

Persons of diverse sex, sexual orientation and gender identity: Umbrella term for all people whose sex, sexual orientation or gender identity places them outside the mainstream, and people whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

LGBTI: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons that is also used as shorthand for “persons of diverse sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.” Among other variations, sometimes intersex is not included and the acronym is LGBT; sometimes “queer” or “questioning” is included and the acronym is LGBTQ or LGBTIQ; and sometimes “ally,” “aromantic” or “asexual” is included, and the acronym is “LGBTQA” or “LGBTIQA.”

SSOGI: An acronym for sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual Orientation: Each person’s enduring capacity for profound romantic, emotional and/or physical feelings for, or attraction to, person(s) of a particular sex or gender. Encompasses hetero-, homo- and bi-sexuality and a wide range of other expressions of sexual orientation.

Heterosexual: An adjective that describes persons whose enduring romantic, emotional and/or physical attraction is to person(s) of a different sex or gender (also referred to as “straight”).

Homosexual: An adjective that describes persons whose enduring romantic, emotional and/or physical attraction is to person(s) of the same sex or gender (also referred to as “gay”). Note that, in English, many people consider homosexual an out-dated clinical term that should be avoided.

Bisexual: An adjective that describes people who have the capacity for romantic, emotional and/or physical attraction to person(s) of the same sex or gender, as well to person(s) of a different sex or gender. Note the term “pansexual” describes individuals who have the capacity for attraction to persons of all gender identities.

Asexual: A person who may experience romantic or emotional attraction, but generally does not experience sexual attraction to anyone.

Gay: An adjective used to describe a man whose enduring romantic, emotional and/or physical attraction is to other men. The term can also be used to describe women who are attracted to other women.

Lesbian: A woman whose enduring romantic, emotional and/or physical attraction is to other women.

Queer: Traditionally a negative term, queer has been re-appropriated by some LGBTI people to describe themselves. It is considered inclusive of a wide range of sexual orientations and gender identities.

Same-Gender Loving (SGL): A phrase used in queer communities of color as an alternative to LGB. It was coined by activist Cleo Manago to better reflect the culture and experiences of persons of African descent.

“Family”: A colloquial term used to identify other LGBTI people, e.g. “that person is family.”

Ally: a heterosexual, cisgender [see definition below] person who supports LGBTI persons.

“Ex-Gay”: A person who once identified as gay but does not any longer. Many went through “reparative therapy” or “transformation ministries,” programmes which claim to “cure” same-sex attraction.

Sex

Sex: The classification of a person as female, male or intersex. Infants are usually assigned a sex at birth based on the appearance of their external anatomy. A person’s sex is a combination of bodily characteristics, including their chromosomes (typically XY chromosome = male, XX chromosome = female), their reproductive organs and their secondary sex characteristics.

Intersex: A person with bodily variations in relation to culturally established standards of maleness and femaleness, including variations at the level of chromosomes, genitalia or secondary sex characteristics. Intersex is sometimes termed “differences in sex development.” “Intersex” is preferred over the out-dated term “hermaphrodite.” Intersex persons are likely to be assigned a sex of male or female at birth. Intersex people may grow to identify themselves with the gender corresponding to the sex they were assigned at birth, or with a different gender.

Intersex children may undergo surgery to make their bodies conform to expectations of a male or female body. Surgical interventions carried out on children by definition cannot be premised upon informed consent. In the majority of cases, there is not a medical need for the surgery beyond the perceived need to bring the child’s body into line with expectations of a typical male or female body. Such surgeries are generally irreversible and cause a wide range of severe, negative physical and psychological health effects. For these reasons, surgery is increasingly controversial and viewed by many as a violation of human rights. In addition to intersex advocacy organizations, a number of other bodies have called for an end to the practice, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Committee Against Torture and the special procedures mandate holders on the right to health and on torture.

Gender Identity

Gender: Whereas “sex” refers to biological and physiological characteristics, “gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for individuals based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender Identity: Refers to each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth or the gender attributed to them by society. It includes the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.

Gender Expression/Presentation: The external manifestation of one’s gender identity expressed through one’s name, pronouns, “masculine,” “feminine” or gender-variant behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice or bodily characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture. Transgender people may seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity rather than the sex they were assigned birth.

The Gender Binary: The classification of gender into two distinct, opposite forms of masculine and feminine. As our understanding of gender evolves, it becomes increasingly clear that gender is a spectrum and the binary fails to capture the nuances of lived gender experiences.

Masculinity/Femininity: Possession of the qualities associated with men and women, or maleness and femaleness, in a particular society at a particular time.

Transgender: Umbrella term used by people whose gender identity and, in some cases, gender expression, differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth, including those whose assigned sex is different from their gender identity and people whose gender identity is neither male nor female as traditionally defined. “Transgender” is preferred over “transsexual,” as it encompasses transsexual and other gender identities.

Transsexual: An older term that is still preferred by some people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. Transsexual persons may take measures to physically alter their bodies through medical interventions, including through hormones, implants and surgery.

Cisgender: Describes a person whose gender identity, gender expression and sex align.

Genderqueer/Third Gender/Non-binary: A blanket term used to describe people whose gender identity falls outside the male-female binary; can also describe persons who identify as both male and female (bigender), don’t identify with any gender (agender) or identify as a mix of different genders (e.g. male, female and agender on different days).

Cross-Dresser: While anyone may wear clothes associated with a different sex or gender, the term cross-dresser is typically used to refer to heterosexual men who occasionally wear clothes, makeup and accessories culturally associated with women. This term is preferred over “transvestite.”

Drag: Refers to men dressing as women, or vice versa, for the purposes of performance or entertainment.



Transition: The process of changing one’s external gender presentation in order to be more in line with one’s gender identity. This is a complex process that typically occurs over a long period of time. Transition includes some or all of the following personal, medical and legal steps: telling one’s family, friends and co-workers, using a different name and new pronouns, dressing differently, changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents, hormone therapy and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The steps involved in transition vary from person to person.

Gender Confirmation/Affirming Surgery (previously Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS)): Gender confirmation, or gender affirming, surgery refers to surgical interventions that may be one part of transition. Not all transgender people choose, have access to or can afford surgery. “Gender confirmation” or “gender affirming” is preferred over “sex reassignment surgery” or “sex change operation.” The terms “pre-operative” (or pre-op) and “post-operative” (or post-op) should also be avoided.

Gender Dysphoria: A diagnosis contained in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). It refers to a feeling of disconnect from or discomfort with one’s sex as assigned at birth. It replaced the out-dated diagnosis “gender identity disorder.” The need for a psychiatric diagnosis for transgender persons to undergo elements of transition such as surgery remains controversial.

Addressing Transgender Individuals: When referring to transgender people, use their preferred pronoun or, where no such preference is expressed, the pronoun that is consistent with their gender expression or presentation.

MTF/FTM: Some transgender women may refer to themselves as M to F or MTF (male-to-female) transgender. Some transgender men may refer to themselves as F to M or FTM (female-to-male) transgender.

Pronouns: A pronoun is a word that refers to either the person talking (I or you) or someone or something being talked about (she, he, it, them or this). Transgender people face difficulty when the pronoun with which they identify does not match the sex they were assigned at birth or others’ perception of their gender identity. For example, a transgender woman may be called “he” by people who are unaware she identifies as female and prefers the pronoun “she,” people who are confused by her gender identity or people who are deliberately trying to hurt her.

Commonly used gender-neutral pronouns in English are they, them and theirs. Less commonly used are ze, hir and hirs (pronounced zee, here and heres). For example, “Caleb really likes their new bike. It’s a great fit and they saved up to buy it themselves!” or “Linh prefers to make hir food by hirself, but ze is always happy to share hir meal.” Some languages don’t require pronouns to indicate gender or have a gender-neutral option, including Japanese, Swahili, Swedish and Turkish. Sweden has added to their language the gender-neutral pronoun “hen” to complement “han” (he) and “hon” (she). Other languages don’t mark gender at all, including Armenian, Finnish, Hungarian, Persian and Yoruba.

Personal Development

Coming out: A lifelong process of self-acceptance. People may acknowledge their identity first to themselves and then share it with others. Publicly identifying one’s identity may or may not be part of coming out, and the concept of coming out is not specific to every culture.

Outed/Public Outing: Describes an individual’s sex, sexual orientation or gender identity being made public against their will or without their knowledge, often for malicious purposes.

Questioning: People who are uncertain of their sex, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Legal Issues

Sodomy Laws: Laws that prohibit adult, consensual, private, non-commercial anal sex. While sodomy laws may also prohibit anal sex between a man and a woman, they are typically disproportionately applied against persons of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities who engage in same-sex sexual acts.

Laws of General Application: Laws that are not specifically targeted towards LGBTI persons but may be used disproportionately against them as a way to police the expression of identities that differ from the mainstream. These may include public debauchery, public morality, public order or impersonation laws.

Civil Union: Formal recognition of committed same-sex relationships. In some countries, civil unions confer many, but not all, of the same rights, benefits and privileges enjoyed by different-sex marriages, including in relation to the payment of taxes, social security benefits, estate planning or medical decisions.

Prejudice

Homophobia, Biphobia or Transphobia: Fear or hatred of gay or lesbian people, of homosexuality, of bisexuality or of transgender individuals. May manifest in exclusion, discrimination or violence.

Heterosexism: Promoting heterosexuality as superior or assuming that all people are heterosexual.

Gay Bashing: Verbal or physical violence against someone who is or who is perceived to be LGBTI.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Any act of violence that targets individuals or groups on the basis of their sex or gender. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, the threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. Gender-based violence encompasses violence directed against people because of how they experience and express their gender and sexual orientation.

Other Terms

Perception: In this context, refers to the act of viewing others in relation to their sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. This is often based on stereotypes and may be done in an unconscious manner.

Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM): A term used to categorize males who engage in sexual activity with other males, regardless of how they identify themselves.

Women Who Have Sex with Women (WSW): A term used to categorize females who engage in sexual activity with other females, regardless of how they identify themselves.

Third Gender/Third Sex: The term third gender is in some contexts used in relation to a gender identity that describes someone who considers themselves, or is considered, neither male nor female by societal definition; in other contexts it is used to describe individuals whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Kathoei/katoey: A term used in Thailand to describe a male-bodied person who has a female gender identity.

Hijra: A broad term used in South Asia (particularly in India), which sometimes refers to individuals who identify as neither male nor female, and in other contexts to male-bodied individuals with a female gender identity. Also referred to as *khawaja sara* and *zenana* in Pakistan and northern India.

Fa'afafine: A third-gender people of Samoa and the Samoan diaspora.

Sworn virgin: Specific to northern Albania, this term describes female-bodied individuals who have the gender presentation and/or identity of male and take a sworn vow of celibacy.

Two-Spirit: Definition varies among Native American cultures. A two-spirited person may be considered as and fulfill the roles assigned to both male and female sexes, or may fulfill the role of a sex that differs from the one they were assigned at birth. They are often revered.

The definitions contained in this glossary were drawn from or informed by, among others, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), Yogyakarta Principles, March 2007, available at: www.yogyakartaprinciples.org; and the GLAAD Media Reference Guide - 9th Edition, available at: <http://www.glaad.org/reference>. For a full list of Terminology sources, see the Continued Learning section of the Module 01 Participant Workbook for the training courses, "Working with LGBTI Persons in Forced Displacement" and "Working with LGBTI Persons in the Humanitarian Context."