

PFLAG National Glossary of Terms

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The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Precise use of terms in regards to gender and sexual orientation can have a significant impact on demystifying many of the misperceptions associated with these concepts. However, the vocabulary of both continues to evolve, and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. Here are some working definitions and examples of frequently used (and misused) terms as a starting point for dialogue and understanding.

Affirmed gender: The gender by which one wishes to be known. This term is often used to replace terms like “new gender” or “chosen gender,” which imply that the current gender was not always a person’s gender or that the gender was chosen rather than simply in existence.

Agender: A person who does not identify with any gender.

Ally: A term used to describe someone who does not identify as LGBTQ but who is supportive of LGBTQ individuals and the community, either personally or as an advocate. Whereas allies to the LGB community typically identify as straight, allies to the transgender community also come from the LGBQ community.

Androgyne: An androgynous individual

Androgynous: A non-binary gender identity typically used to describe a person’s appearances or clothing.

Asexual: An individual who does not experience sexual attraction. There is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy or sexual abstinence, which are chosen behaviors, while asexuality is a sexual orientation that does not necessarily entail either of those behaviors. Some asexual individuals do have sex, for a variety of reasons.

Assigned sex: The sex that is assigned to an infant at birth based on the child’s visible sex organs, including genitalia and other physical characteristics.

Assumed gender: The gender a person is assumed to be based on the sex they are assigned at birth.

Biological sex: Refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic, or physical attributes that define if a person is male, female, or intersex. These include genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, hormone receptors, chromosomes, genes, and secondary sex characteristics. Sex is often confused or interchanged with gender, which is thought of as more social and less biological, though there is some considerable overlap.

Bisexual: An individual who is emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to the same gender and different genders. Sometimes stated as “bi.” People who are bisexual need not have had equal sexual experience with people of the same or different genders and, in fact, need not have had any sexual experience at all; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

Cisgender: A term used to describe an individual whose gender identity aligns with the one typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Closeted: Describes a person who is not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, or an ally who is not open about their support for people who are LGBTQ.

Coming out: For most people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, the process of self-acceptance that continues throughout one’s life, and the sharing of the information with others. Sometimes referred to as “disclosing” by the transgender community. Individuals often establish a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender/gender-nonconforming identity within themselves first, and then may choose to reveal it to others. Coming out can also apply to the family and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth or adults when they reveal to others their connection to an LGBTQ person or the community. There are many different degrees of being out: Some may be out to friends only, some may be out publicly, and some may be out only to themselves. It’s important to remember that coming out is an incredibly personal and transformative experience. Not everyone is in the same place when it comes to being out, and it is critical to respect where each person is in that process of self-identification. It is up to each person, individually, to decide if and when to come out or disclose.

Disclosure: A word that some people use intently and others avoid with equal intent, preferring to use the term “coming out” to describe the act or process of revealing one’s transgender or gender nonconforming identity to another person in a specific instance. Some find the term offensive, implying the need to disclose something shameful, while others prefer disclosure, finding “coming out” offensive.

Gay: The adjective used to describe people who are emotionally, romantically, or physically attracted to people of the same gender (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, “lesbian” is often a preferred term for women, though many women use the word “gay” to describe themselves. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

Gender: A set of social, psychological, or emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual as male, female, a mixture of both, or neither.

Gender-affirming surgery (GAS): Surgical procedures that help people adjust their bodies in a way that more closely matches their innate or internal gender identity. Not every transgender person will desire or have resources for surgery. This should be used in place of the older and often offensive term “sex change.” Also sometimes referred to as sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), genital reconstruction surgery, or medical transition.

Gender binary: The concept that there are only two genders, male and female, and that everyone must be one or the other. Also implies the assumption that gender is biologically determined.

Gender expansive: Also "gender creative," (or medically, "gender variant"). An umbrella term sometimes used to describe children and youth that expand notions of gender expression and identity beyond what is perceived as the expected gender norms for their society or context. Some gender-expansive individuals identify with being either male or female, some identify as neither, and others identify as a mix of both. Gender-expansive people feel that they exist psychologically between genders, as on a spectrum, or beyond the notion of the male and female binary paradigm, and sometimes prefer using gender-neutral pronouns (see "Preferred Gender Pronouns"). They may or may not be comfortable with their bodies as they are, regardless of how they express their gender.

Gender expression: The manner in which a person communicates about gender to others through external means such as clothing, appearance, or mannerisms. This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect their gender identity or sexual orientation. While most people's understandings of gender expressions relate to masculinity and femininity, there are countless combinations that may incorporate both masculine and feminine expressions—or neither—through androgynous expressions. The important thing to recognize is that an individual's gender expression does not automatically imply one's gender identity.

Gender identity: One's deeply held core sense of being male, female, some of both, or neither. One's gender identity does not always correspond to biological sex. Awareness of gender identity is usually experienced as early as 18 months old and reinforced in adolescence.

Gender neutral: Not gendered. Can refer to language (including pronouns), spaces (like bathrooms), or identities (like being gender queer, for example).

Gender nonconforming: A term (considered by some to be outdated) used to describe those who view their gender identity as one of many possible genders beyond strictly female or male. More current terms include "gender expansive," "differently gendered," "gender creative," "gender variant," "gender queer," "gender fluid," "gender neutral," "bigender," "androgynous," or "gender diverse."

Gender spectrum: The concept that gender exists beyond a simple "male/female" binary model, but instead exists on an infinite continuum that transcends the two. Some people fall towards more masculine or more feminine aspects, some people move fluidly along the spectrum, and some identify off the spectrum entirely.

Gender variant: A term, often used by the medical community, to describe children and youth who dress, behave, or express themselves in a way that does not conform to dominant gender norms. (See "gender nonconforming.") People outside the medical community tend to avoid this term because they feel it suggests these identities are abnormal, preferring terms such as "gender expansive" and "gender creative."

Homophobia: An aversion to lesbian or gay people that often manifests itself in the form of prejudice and bias. Similarly, “biphobia” is an aversion to bisexuality and people who are bisexual, and “transphobia” is an aversion to people who are transgender. “Homophobic,” “biphobic,” and “transphobic” are the related adjectives. Collectively, these attitudes are referred to as “anti-LGBTQ bias.”

Homosexual: An outdated clinical term often considered derogatory and offensive, as opposed to the preferred terms, “gay” and “lesbian.”

Intersex/differences of sexual development (DSD): Individuals born with ambiguous genitalia or bodies that appear neither typically male nor female, often arising from chromosomal anomalies or ambiguous genitalia. In the past, medical professionals commonly assigned a male or female gender to the individual and proceeded to perform gender-affirming surgeries beginning in infancy and often continuing into adolescence, before a child was able to give informed consent. Formerly the medical terms “hermaphrodite” and “pseudo-hermaphrodite” were used; these terms are now considered neither acceptable nor scientifically accurate. The Intersex Society of North America opposes this practice of genital mutilation on infants and children.

Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to other women. People who are lesbians need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

LGBTQ: An acronym that collectively refers to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. It is sometimes stated as “GLBT” (gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender). Occasionally, the acronym is stated as “LGBTQA” to include people who are asexual or allies, “LGBTQ,” with “Q” representing queer or questioning, or “LGBTI,” with the “I” representing intersex.

Lifestyle: A negative term often incorrectly used to describe the lives of people who are LGBTQ. The term is disliked because it implies that being LGBTQ is a choice.

Misgender: To refer to someone, especially a transgender person, using a word, especially a pronoun or form of address, which does not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify.

Out: Describes people who openly self-identify as LGBTQ in their private, public, and/or professional lives. Some people who are transgender prefer to use the term “disclose” (defined above).

Pansexual: A person whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to people of all gender identities and biological sexes. People who are pansexual need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

Preferred Gender Pronouns: A preferred gender pronoun, or PGP, is the pronoun or set of pronouns that an individual would like others to use when talking to or about that individual. In English, the singular pronouns that we use most frequently are gendered, which can create an issue for transgender and gender-nonconforming people, who may prefer that you use gender

neutral or gender-inclusive pronouns when talking to or about them. The most commonly used singular gender-neutral pronouns are “ze” (sometimes spelled “zie”) and “hir.” Some also use “they” and “their” as gender-neutral singular pronouns.

Queer: A term used by some people—particularly youth—to describe themselves and/or their community. Reclaimed from its earlier negative use, the term is valued by some for its defiance, by some because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, “queer” is still sometimes disliked within the LGBTQ community. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer (i.e. “My cousin identifies as genderqueer.”)

Questioning: A term used to describe those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof.

Same-Gender loving: A term sometimes used by members of the African-American/Black community to express an alternative sexual orientation (gay/bisexual) without relying on terms and symbols of European descent.

Sexual orientation: Emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people. People who are straight experience these feelings primarily for people of a different gender than their own. People who are gay or lesbian experience these feelings primarily for people of the same gender; people who are bisexual experience these feelings for people of different genders, though not always at the same time, and people who are asexual experience no sexual attraction at all. Other terms include pansexual and polysexual. Sexual orientation is part of the human condition, while sexual behavior involves the choices one makes in acting on one’s sexual orientation. One’s sexual activity does not define who one is with regard to one’s sexual orientation; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

Stealth: A term used to describe transgender or gender-expansive individuals who do not disclose their transgender or gender-expansive status in their public or private lives (or certain aspects of their public lives). The term is increasingly considered offensive by some as it implies an element of deception. The phrase “maintaining privacy” is often used instead.

Transgender: Sometime shortened to “trans.” A term describing a person’s gender identity that does not necessarily match their assigned sex at birth. Other terms commonly used are “female to male” (FTM), “male to female” (MTF), and “genderqueer.” Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. This word is also used as a broad umbrella term to describe those who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression. Like any umbrella term, many different groups of people with different histories and experiences are often included within the greater transgender community—such groups include, but are certainly not limited to, people who identify as transsexual, genderqueer, gender variant, gender diverse, and androgynous.

Transition: A term sometimes used to describe the process—social, legal, or medical—one goes through to discover and/or affirm one’s gender identity. This may, but does not always, include

taking hormone; having surgeries; and changing names, pronouns, identification documents, and more. Many individuals choose not to or are unable to transition for a wide range of reasons both within and beyond their control.

Transsexual: A less frequently used—and sometimes misunderstood—term (considered by some to be outdated or possibly offensive, and others to be uniquely applicable to them) which refers to people who are transgender who use (or consider using) medical interventions such as hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgeries (GAS), also called sex reassignment surgery (SRS) (or a combination of the two) or pursue medical interventions as part of the process of expressing their gender. Some people who identify as transsexual do not identify as transgender and vice versa.