
The Language of Gender

The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Precise use of terms in regards to gender can have a significant impact on demystifying many of the misperceptions associated with gender. However, the vocabulary of gender continues to evolve and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. Nonetheless, here is some working language and examples of frequently used (and misused) terms. We offer them as a starting place for dialogue and understanding, which begins with a shared understanding of **how** a particular term is being used, rather than an assertion that they represent the final or only final definition of the various terms.

Biological/Anatomical Sex. The physical structure of one's genitalia used to assign sex at birth. In addition to these, biological sex includes chromosomes, hormones and internal organs and other structures related to reproduction. Given the potential variation in all of these, biological sex must be seen as a spectrum or range of possibilities rather than a binary set of only two options (see "Intersex").

Gender Identity. One's innermost core concept of self which can include male, female, a blend of both or neither, and many more—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different than the sex assigned at birth. Individuals become conscious of this between the ages 18 months and 3 years. Most people develop a gender identity that matches their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological or assigned sex. Some of these individuals choose to socially, hormonally and/or surgically change their physical appearance to more fully match their gender identity and some do not.

Gender Expression. Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, and other forms of presentation. Gender expression also works the other way as people assign gender to others based on their appearance, mannerisms, and other artificially gendered characteristics. When referred to as a "culturally constructed concept," gender expression is most often the dimension being described. Gender expression should not be viewed as an indication of sexual orientation.

Gender Role. This is the set of roles, activities, expectations and behaviors commonly associated with females and males by society. Our culture recognizes two basic gender roles: Masculine (having the qualities typically attributed to males) and feminine (having the qualities typically attributed to females). There are societies throughout the world that have more nuanced notions about gender roles, with three or more designations.

Transgender. Sometimes used as an umbrella term to describe anyone whose identity or behavior falls outside of stereotypical gender norms. More narrowly defined, it refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match their assigned birth sex. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation (attraction to people of a specific sex and/or gender.) Therefore, transgender people may additionally identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, etc.

Sexual Orientation. Term that refers to being physically, romantically or sexually attracted to people of a specific gender and/or sex. Our sexual orientation and our gender identity are separate, distinct parts of our overall identity. Although a child may not yet be aware of their sexual orientation, they usually have a strong sense of their gender identity.

Genderqueer. This term represents a blurring of the lines around gender and sexual orientation. Genderqueer individuals typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and sexual orientation. This term is typically used as an identifier for teens or adults and not used in reference to pre-adolescent children.

Cisgender/Gender Normative. Refers to people whose sex assignment at birth corresponds to their gender identity, and often their expression (*cis-* from Latin meaning "on the same side [as]" or "on this side [of].") In contrast to *trans-* from the Latin root meaning "across", "beyond" or "on the opposite side").

Gender-expansive. An umbrella term used for individuals that broaden their own culture's commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expression, identities, roles, and/or other perceived gender norms. Gender-expansive individuals include those who identify as transgender, as well as anyone else whose gender in some way is seen to be stretching the surrounding society's notions of gender.

Cross Gender. Sometimes used to describe children who have adopted attributes that transgress the usual socially assigned gender roles or expectations, or who do not identify as either of the two sexes as currently defined.

Gender Fluidity: Gender fluidity conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender expression or identity, with interests and behaviors that may change, even from day to day. Gender fluid children do not feel confined by restrictive boundaries of stereotypical expectations of girls or boys. In other words, a child may feel they are a girl some days and a boy on others, or a combination, or possibly feel that neither term describes them accurately.

DSD/Intersex: Disorders/Differences of Sexual Development. About 1% of children are born with chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and/or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female as defined by the medical establishment in our society. In most cases, these children are at no medical risk, but most are assigned a biological sex (male or female) by their doctors and/or families.

FtM (Female to Male)/Affirmed male/transboy. A child or adult who was born anatomically female but has a male gender identity. This individual may or may not have undergone a transition of some sort.

MtF (Male to Female)/Affirmed female/transgirl. A child or adult who was born anatomically male but has a female gender identity. This individual may or may not have undergone a transition of some sort.

Gender. A socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. Gender expectations and norms can change over time and are different between cultures. Gender is often used synonymously, and incorrectly with sex, but this is inaccurate because sex refers to physical/biological characteristics and gender refers to social and emotional attributes.

Transition: The process by which a transgender individual strives to have physical presentation more closely align with identity. Transition can occur in three ways: *social transition* through non-permanent changes in such things as clothing, hairstyle, name and/or pronouns; *medical transition* through the use of medicines such as hormone "blockers" or cross hormones to promote gender-based body changes; and/or *surgical transition* in which an individual's body is modified through the addition or removal of gender-related physical traits.

Transsexuals. Individuals who do not identify with their birth-assigned genders and physically alter their bodies surgically and/or hormonally. This physical transition is a complicated, multi-step process that may take years and may include, but is not limited to, sex reassignment surgery.

Transphobia. Fear or hatred of transgender people; transphobia is manifested in a number of ways, including violence, harassment, and discrimination.