

TERMINOLOGY GUIDANCE

Glossary of Terms

The language used to describe sex characteristics, sexual orientation and gender identity **varies greatly** across the world. Depending on factors like language, age, gender, education and cultural references, it may vary within regions, countries and communities. There are some words and phrases that are commonly used by the UN and the international community which you will find in guiding documents and reports; these are the words and phrases examined here. We recognize the majority of these terms are of Western origin, and that, in particular, “LGBTI” represents concepts of personal identity that are not universal. Many people do not use the “LGBTI” terms, including in the West, and it is critical to respect the autonomy of individuals in defining their own identities. We encourage you to learn the relevant terms in your own language(s) and context and, when in doubt, ask those you work with or serve.

Persons of diverse sex, sexual orientation and gender identity: Umbrella term for all people whose sex characteristics, 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.” Sometimes intersex is not included and the acronym is LGBT. Sometimes “queer” or “questioning” is included and the acronym is LGBTQ or LGBTIQ. Sometimes “aromantic” or “asexual” is included, and the acronym is “LGBTQA” or “LGBTIQA.”

SSOGI: An acronym for sex / sex characteristics, 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 and/or gender. Encompasses hetero-, homo- and bisexuality and a wide range of other expressions of sexual orientation.

Sexual Behaviour: What we do sexually, and with whom; not always an accurate indicator of sexual orientation.

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

Homosexual: An adjective that describes persons whose romantic, emotional and/or physical attraction is to person(s) of the same sex and/or gender (also referred to as “gay”). Note that, in English, many people consider homosexual an outdated 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 and/or gender, as well to person(s) of a different sex and/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 not sexual attraction.

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 persons 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.

Ally: A heterosexual, cisgender [see definition below] person who supports LGBTI people.

Sex

Sex: The classification of a person as having female, male and/or intersex characteristics. Infants are usually assigned the sex of male or female at birth based on the appearance of their external anatomy. A person’s sex is a combination



of bodily characteristics, including chromosomes (typically XY chromosome = male, XX chromosome = female), reproductive organs and secondary sex characteristics.

Intersex: An umbrella term describing a wide range of natural bodily variations related to sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads, reproductive organs and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. Intersex people are typically assigned a sex of male or female at birth, and the majority of intersex people identify as male or female. Like all people, intersex people may identify with any sexual orientation and with any gender or with no gender. Children with intersex traits may be subjected to surgeries, hormonal treatments and other procedures in an attempt to forcibly change their appearance to align with societal expectations about male and female bodies. Surgery and other treatments carried out on children by definition cannot be premised upon informed consent. In the vast majority of cases, there is not a medical need for such interventions. Surgery is typically irreversible and can cause a wide range of severe, negative physical and psychological health effects, as well as result in sterilization.

Parents of intersex children often face pressure to agree to such surgeries or treatments without being informed of alternatives or about the potential negative consequences. The rationale is frequently based on social prejudice, stigma associated with intersex bodies and administrative requirements to assign sex at the moment of birth registration. The UN considers surgery and other unnecessary treatments on intersex individuals to be a fundamental human rights violation. In addition to intersex advocacy organizations, a number of other bodies have called for an end to the practice of unnecessary surgery and treatment, 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.

Dyadic: Adjective used to describe a person who was born with sex characteristics that fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies (e.g., non-intersex). A dyadic person may identify with any gender identity and any sexual orientation.

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 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, behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice or bodily characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine; 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 labeled 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: Transgender is used by some people whose gender identity and, in some cases, gender expression, differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans, transgender, gender diverse and gender non-conforming may be used as “umbrella terms” representing a variety of words that describe an internal sense of gender differing from the sex assigned at birth, whether one feels male, female, another gender or no gender.

Transsexual: An older term still preferred by some whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. Transsexual persons may take steps to alter their bodies through medical interventions such as hormones, implants and surgery.

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

Genderqueer/Third Gender/Non-binary: Terms 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 gender, the term cross-dresser typically refers to heterosexual men who occasionally wear clothes, makeup and accessories culturally associated with women.

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 to be more in line with one's gender identity. Transition typically occurs over a long period of time and includes some or all of the following personal, medical and legal steps: telling one's family, friends and co-workers, using a different name, pronoun and/or title, dressing differently, changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents, and possibly (though not always) undergoing hormone therapy and/or one or more other types of treatment. The steps involved in transition vary from person to person. In some countries, surgery is a requirement for legal gender recognition, in violation of UN human rights norms.

Gender Confirmation/Affirming Treatment: Gender confirmation, or gender affirming, treatment, refers to various medical interventions that may be one part of transition. Not all transgender people choose or can afford medical interventions such as hormone therapy or surgery. The terms "pre-operative" (or pre-op), "post-operative" (or post-op), "sex reassignment surgery" and "sex change operation" should be avoided. Problematically, in many states, gender confirmation/affirming treatment is a requirement for legal gender recognition.

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 discomfort with one's assigned sex. It replaced "gender identity disorder," but is controversial as it classifies being transgender as a medical condition. Some trans people, organizations and the UN have called for the reform of medical classifications to depathologize trans identities.

Addressing Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals: When referring to transgender and gender non-conforming people, as with non-transgender people, ask what name, gender, pronoun and title they use.

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.

Personal Pronouns: A pronoun is a word that refers to either the person talking (I or you) or someone being talked about (she, he, them or this). Trans and gender non-conforming people, like everyone else, want to be addressed with the correct pronoun as well as name, gender and title. Commonly used gender-neutral pronouns in English are they, them and theirs. Less common are ze, hir and hers (pronounced zee, here and heres). 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 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. For some, coming out can be a lifelong process.

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 LGBT 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

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.

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.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Any act of violence targeting individuals or groups on the basis of their sex and/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

The following are just a few examples of the thousands of terms that are used to describe diverse sex, sexual orientation and gender identity in various locations around the world. You are encouraged to identify the terms relevant to your language(s) and specific context.

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.

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 individuals with a female gender identity and assigned sex of male. 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 individuals with the assigned sex of female 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 in this glossary were drawn from or informed by, among others, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) Yogyakarta Principles, www.yogyakartaprinciples.org; the GLAAD Media Reference Guide - 9th Edition, <http://www.glaad.org/reference> and interACT Advocates for Intersex Youth, <https://interactadvocates.org>. For a full list of Terminology sources, see the Continued Learning section of the Module 01 Participant Workbook.