

## Terms and Definitions

*The following is a list of working definitions of terms related to LGBTQIA<sup>+</sup> identities. This list cannot be comprehensive and language is always evolving. You are encouraged to seek additional information to better understand the nuances of each of these terms, and to learn about terms not included here. Part of being an ally is continuing to educate yourself about language related to sex, sexual identity, and gender identity/expression.*

**Agender:** Someone without a gender. While some people identify themselves as a man, a woman, gender fluid, and so on, a person who identifies as agender doesn't identify as having any gender at all. (Note: this is *not* the same as being asexual; see below.)

**Ally:** A person from a dominant social group who openly affirms and advocates for the safety, dignity, and inclusion of others from a subordinated social group. In an LGBTQIA<sup>+</sup> context, an ally is someone who confronts heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexual and cisgender privilege in themselves and others. Allyship in this context means advocating for the well-being and civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, and asexual people, as well as other gender and sexual minorities.

**Asexual:** A person who is not sexually attracted to anyone. In its broadest sense, asexuality is the lack of sexual attraction and the lack of interest in and desire for sex. However, some asexual people might experience emotional attraction or other non-sexual attractions.

Asexual people may also refer to themselves as “**Ace**,” a shortened version of and slang for a spectrum of asexual identities. People who fall under the Ace umbrella may experience sexual attraction occasionally, in certain contexts, or never at all.

**Biphobia:** The fear of, discrimination against, hatred, or cultural erasure of bisexuals and others who are attracted to two or more genders. Biphobia is often related to binary thinking—i.e. thinking of people as gay/straight with no other options in-between or otherwise. Biphobia can be seen within general society at large, as well as in LGBTQIA<sup>+</sup> communities.

**Bisexual:** A person who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and/or sexually attracted to both men and women. This word is older than the word “pansexual” (see below) and may be used interchangeably by some. Sometimes people identify as “bi” for short or use “bi” to modify other identities they claim (i.e. “bi-lesbian”).

**Butch:** A person, usually female-identified, who identifies and/or expresses themselves as masculine, whether it be physically, mentally, or emotionally. Most frequently claimed as an affirmative identity label among lesbian women and gender non-conforming people assigned female at birth.

**Cisgender:** A person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. Sometimes “cis” for short. “Cisgender” is preferred to terms like “biological,” “genetic,” or “real” man or woman, as these terms suggest that transgender people’s genders are not authentic or legitimate.

**Cisgenderism:** The cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege cisgender people and subordinate and denigrate people who are not cisgender. Includes the assumption that everyone is cisgender (until proven otherwise) or that it is more natural or normal to be cisgender than transgender.

Cisgenderism also relates to **cisgender privilege**—advantages that come from identifying or being perceived as cisgender (i.e. acceptance from family and religious institutions, safety in public spaces, access to public accommodations such as restrooms, access to competent and respectful healthcare, acceptance in one’s chosen career field, protections from employment and housing discrimination, having the state recognize one’s gender identity without having to go through lengthy and expensive process of changing legal documents, etc.).

**Coming Out:** The life-long process of discovering, defining, and proclaiming one’s LGBTQIA+ identity.

**Cross-dresser:** A person who wears clothes, makeup, etc. that are considered by the culture to be appropriate for another gender but not one's own. “Cross-dresser” is the preferred term to “transvestite,” which some consider a potentially offensive outdated medical term. This term falls under the umbrella term “transgender” (see below). Cross-dressing is not the same as dressing **in drag**, which is generally for entertainment purposes only.

**Drag:** *Queen*, a person who consciously performs femininity, sometimes in an exaggerated/theatrical manner, usually in a show or theatre setting; *King*, a person who consciously performs masculinity, sometimes in an exaggerated/theatrical manner, usually in a show or theatre setting.

**Dyadic:** People born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that seems to fit the typical definitions of “female” or “male.” This term describes people who are not intersex (see below).

**Dyke:** A derogatory slang term used to denigrate lesbians, sometimes embraced and reinvented as a positive, proud, political identifier when used by some lesbians among and about themselves. Generally considered offensive if used by someone who does not identify as a woman who is lesbian, bisexual, queer, or as a woman who loves women.

**FTM:** A female-to-male transsexual or transgender person, or a trans man. Some transgender people reject this term, arguing that they have always been male and are only making that identity visible. Others feel that such language reinforces an either/or gender system. See also “MTF.”

**Faggot/Fag:** A derogatory slang term used to denigrate gay men, sometimes embraced and reclaimed as a positive, proud, political identifier when used by some gay men among and about themselves. Generally considered offensive if used by someone who does not identify as a man who is gay, bisexual, queer, or as a man who loves men.

**Femme:** A person who physically, mentally or emotionally expresses and/or identifies with femininity, often through a specifically queer, politically radical, or subversive context. While the term is most popularly used by LGBTQ<sup>+</sup> women, there are people of all genders/sexes who identify as femme, including genderqueer and transfeminine people who identify with femininity but outside of the gender binary, as well as some gay men who reclaim male effeminacy.

**Gay:** A term used in some cultural settings to refer to men who have emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or sexual attraction to other men. Not all men who engage in sexual behavior with other men identify as gay. Depending on the context (i.e. in healthcare) using a broader phrase such as “men who have sex with men” or “men who love men” might be more inclusive.

The term “gay” has also historically been used as an umbrella term to refer to the LGBTQ<sup>+</sup> community as a whole or to any individuals who do not identify as heterosexual. However, using the term “gay” to represent an entire LGBTQ<sup>+</sup> community neglects the experiences and differences between sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity/expression. As such, using “gay” as a generalizing label should be done with great caution.

**Gender:** The social construction of masculinity, femininity, and other gender categories (i.e. androgyny, “third sex,” etc.) in a specific culture. It involves gender assignment (the gender one is assigned at birth or earlier), gender roles (the social expectations imposed on someone based on their gender), gender attribution (how others perceive someone's gender), gender identity (how someone defines their own gender), and gender expression (how someone expresses their gender).

**Gender Binary:** The idea that there are only two genders—men/women, masculinity/femininity—and that these genders are “opposite” of each other. The gender binary is enforced through socialization and cultural norms, including a sensed requirement that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or, with no options in-between or otherwise.

**Gender Expression:** Everything we do that communicates our gender to others: clothing, hair styles, mannerisms, way of speaking, roles we take in interactions, etc. Gender expression is separate and distinct from both *gender identity* and *sexual identity*, but it often leads people to make false or incomplete assumptions about the gender and sexual identities of others. Gender expression encompasses a diversity of expressions, including femininity, masculinity, androgyny (neither masculine nor feminine) and expressions that combine many supposedly “opposite” elements (sometimes called “genderqueer”). Gender expression can vary for an individual from day to day or in different situations, but most people can identify a range on the scale where they feel the most comfortable. Some people are comfortable with a wider range of gender expressions than others.

**Gender Identity:** How one sees oneself as a gendered person. Gender identity is one of our innermost concepts of self and is frequently described using terms like “male/man” or “female/woman”—though this binary view of gender is troublesome, as it is often credited for much of the oppression experienced by LGBTQIA<sup>+</sup> people. It is important to note that gender identity is how we think about ourselves and call ourselves—it is not defined by how other people perceive our gender. Some people develop a gender identity that aligns with gender expectations based on their sex assigned at birth. Others, however, experience their gender identity as different from gender expectations based on their sex assigned at birth. Gender identity may be fluid or not, depending on the individual and their experience of cultural influences.

**Gender-Inclusive:** Practices, language, and spaces that seek to include people of all genders. This term is slightly different from “gender-neutral” because while both terms connote inclusivity of multiple genders, “gender-inclusive” does not connote the absence of gender. Instead “gender-inclusive” embraces a diversity of gender identities and expressions, rather than suggesting that gender must be done away with or ignored in order to have inclusive spaces and language.

**Gender Non-Conforming:** A person who either by nature or by choice does not conform to gender-based expectations of society in terms of appearance, identification, and/or behavior (e.g. transgender, transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, non-binary person, butch, queer femme, cross-dresser, etc.). Also known as “gender variant”

**Genderqueer:** A term used by those who may not identify as either male or female, as a man or a woman, and who often are comfortable blurring gender lines.

**Heterosexual:** A person who has emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or sexual attractions to persons of a different sex than themselves. More commonly referred to as “straight” in everyday language. The sexuality that dominant sociocultural institutions prescribe and privilege over other sexualities (see “heteronormativity”).

**Heteronormativity:** An (often subconscious) idea that everyone is or should be heterosexual and the attitudes associated with that assumption.

**1. Heterosexual Privilege:** Advantages that come with identifying or being perceived as heterosexual (i.e. acceptance from family and religious institutions, safety in public spaces, access to competent and respectful healthcare, and acceptance in one’s chosen career field, etc.).

**2. Heterosexism:** The assumption that all people are heterosexual (until proven otherwise), the assumption and/or belief that heterosexual relationships are superior to other kinds of relationships, or that heterosexual relationships are more natural, more likely to make a person happy, etc.

**Homophobia:** The fear, hatred, or intolerance of people who identify or are perceived as lesbian or gay, including the fear of being seen as lesbian or gay yourself. Homophobic behavior can

range from telling jokes about lesbians and gay men, to verbal abuse, to acts of physical violence.

**Homosexual:** A person who has emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or sexual attraction to persons of the same sex. More of a medical term, it is considered outdated and potentially derogatory when referring to LGBTQ<sup>+</sup> people or communities.

**Intersex:** An umbrella term for people who challenge the male/female binary sex system. Intersex people exhibit biological and anatomical diversity which might include ambiguous genitalia, having traits of both male and female reproductive organs, possessing a chromosomal variance other than XY or XX, having hormone levels that are not considered average, or other biological factors which don't easily fit into socially constructed "male" or "female" boxes. Intersex conditions are fairly common—about 2% of the human population are intersex. Many who identify as intersex believe that early childhood surgical intervention is not only unnecessary but cruel. Instead they advocate for counseling and support for children and families.

Intersex people were formerly referred to by the medical establishment as "hermaphrodites," a term that is now considered offensive. Some intersex people might reclaim this term to talk about and among themselves, but when dyadic people use this word it is considered a slur.

**Lavender:** This color is historically associated with gays and lesbians. The association goes back into ancient times and has been strengthened in modern times by the fact that lavender, or purple, is the combination of red (pink) and blue, the traditional gender-identified colors.

**Lesbian:** A term used in some cultural settings to refer to a woman who has emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or sexual attractions to other women. Not all women who engage in sexual behavior with other women identify as lesbian. Depending on the context (i.e. in healthcare) using a broader phrase such as "women who have sex with women" or "women who love women" might be more inclusive.

**MTF:** A male-to-female transsexual or transgender person, or a trans woman. Some transgender people reject this term, arguing that they have always been female and are only making that identity visible. Others feel that such language reinforces an either/or gender system. See also "FTM."

**Non-Binary:** Describes a gender identity that is neither female/woman nor male/man; gender identities that are outside of or beyond binary, opposing concepts of male/man or female/woman. See also "genderqueer" and "transgender."

**Pansexual:** A term used in some cultural settings to describe a person who can be emotionally, physically, spiritually, and/or sexually attracted to people of various genders, gender expressions, and sexes, including those outside the gender binary. Pansexual people embrace the idea that there are many genders beyond "men" and "women," and pansexuals often express that their capacity to be attracted to and to love certain people is not gender-specific.

**Passing:** A survival tactic often used by a member of a marginalized group who (either intentionally or unintentionally) gains safety, access to public space, and the privileges associated with a dominant group. Passing might refer to the following contexts:

1. A person of color's ability to be accepted as white.
2. A transgender person's ability to be accepted as their self-identified gender/sex.
3. An LGBTQ+ person's ability to be accepted as heterosexual.

**Polyamory:** Refers to having honest, non-monogamous romantic, emotional, and/or sexual relationships with multiple partners. Polyamory can include: open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves multiple romantic partners with sexual contact restricted to those relationships), and sub-relationships (which denote distinguishing between a "primary" relationship or relationships and various "secondary" relationships). Polyamorous people might be straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, etc.—being polyamorous does not indicate one's sexual orientation.

To be clear, many LGBTQIA+ people engage in monogamous relationships. However, historically LGBTQIA+ communities have innovated language around polyamory and have created space for individuals to explore ethically non-monogamous relationships which dominant, heteronormative culture does not support.

**Same Gender Loving:** A term sometimes used by members of African-American/Black communities to express an alternative sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols of white cultural origins. The term emerged in the early 1990s with the intention of offering Black women who love women and Black men who love men a voice, a way of identifying and being that resonated with the uniqueness of Black culture in life. (Sometimes abbreviated as "SGL.")

**Sex:** The social construction of a binary system (male/female) based on a collection of biological traits and factors, either known or assumed. Sex is usually defined as relating to reproductive organs, appearance of genitalia at birth or earlier, chromosomes, hormones, and/or secondary sex characteristics (i.e. breast development, body hair, etc.). Sometimes referred to as "biological sex," it is important to keep in mind that sex is a cultural construct as much as it is biological. The fact that dominant Western culture prescribes a binary system with only two sexes obscures other ways to conceptualize sex, and ignores people who do not neatly fit into the categories "male" and "female." See "intersex."

**Sex Assigned at Birth:** The sex one is labeled at birth or earlier, generally by a medical or birthing professional, based on an examination of physical characteristics such as genitalia, and cultural concepts of male and female sexed bodies. This label is reinforced through the medical industry, legal documents, cultural and familial expectations, and so on. Sex assignment is used to label one's gender identity prior to self-identification.

This phrase has been innovated by intersex and trans activists who emphasize that individuals are forced into a two-sex binary from birth, even if that is not an accurate description of an individual's understanding and expression of their sex and/or gender.



“Sex assigned at birth” is preferred over the phrase “biological sex” because the latter suggests that trans and intersex individuals will always be the sex others assigned them at birth, no matter how they identify. In contrast, the phrase “sex assigned at birth” distinguishes between the category imposed on a person at birth and their authentic gender/sex identity. “Sex assigned at birth” connotes that individuals are the experts about their own gender/sex identities.

**Sexual Identity:** How one identifies one's degree of desire for intimate emotional and/or sexual relationships with people of the same gender/sex, another gender/sex, or multiple genders/sexes. Sexual identity is how one *identifies*, i.e. the term(s) one uses to articulate one's self and desires, the communities one identifies with, and so on.

**Sexual Orientation:** The direction of one's sexual interest toward members of the same, different, or multiple sexes/genders. Sexual orientation is how one *feels*, i.e. who one is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and/or sexually attracted to or who one loves. Sexual orientation is not necessarily the same as sexual identity, as people may choose to identify in many ways, but orientation is not a matter of choice or something people often have control over.

**Trans or Transgender:** An umbrella term for someone whose gender identity or gender expression does not align with social expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Sometimes “trans” for short. This term can include transgender people, transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag queens and kings, genderqueer people, gender fluid people, and others who cross or transgress the gender binary. The ways that trans people might challenge binary gender categories ranges from identifying differently than the gender one was assigned at birth, to cross dressing, to undergoing hormone therapy, to gender confirmation surgery, to other forms of dress/presentation.

Using “trans\*” generally signals that one is referring to an expansive multiplicity of identities, as described above.

**Transsexual:** A person whose gender identity does not align with social expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. This term falls under the umbrella term “transgender” (see above). People who identify as transsexual often—but not always—undergo hormone therapy treatments and/or gender confirmation surgeries to align their bodies with their gender identity, but not all desire or are able to do so.

This term may be seen as dated or as a medical term, and many trans people, especially those who are younger, may prefer the terms “trans” or “transgender.” It is always best to use the terms that people prefer to be called by, rather than assuming, but using the term “transgender” may currently be more acceptable in more cultural contexts than the term “transsexual.”

**Transition/ing:** The process of changing one's gender expression to match one's gender identity. Transitioning might include making changes in appearance (i.e. clothing, hair, makeup), bodily changes (i.e. hormone therapy, surgery), or changes in names, pronouns, and

identification. There is no single way that people transition, and transition could include all of these changes or none of them.

**Transphobia:** The fear, hatred, intolerance, and/or cultural erasure of people who identify or are perceived as transgender.

**Two Spirit:** A Native American/First Nation term for people who blend the masculine and the feminine. It is commonly used to describe individuals who historically crossed gender boundaries and were accepted by Native American/First Nation cultures with gender systems with more than two genders. It is also often used by contemporary LGBTQ<sup>+</sup> Native American and First Nation people to describe themselves.

Two Spirit is often preferred to the term “berdache,” a term generally rejected as inappropriate and offensive by Native Peoples because it is a term that was assigned by European settlers to differently gendered Native Peoples. Appropriate terms vary by tribe and include: “one-spirit,” “two-spirit,” and “wintke.”

### **Queer:**

1. An umbrella term which embraces a matrix of sexual desires, identities, and expressions of the not-exclusively-heterosexual and/or monogamous variety, varieties often subordinated in a heteronormative sexual hierarchy. “Queer” includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans people, intersex people, radical sex communities (i.e. polyamorous communities, BDSM communities, etc.), and many other people with marginalized sexual identities.
2. This term is sometimes used as a sexual identity label instead of “bisexual” or “pansexual” as a way of acknowledging that there are more than two genders to be attracted to. Furthermore, this term has political connotations, often associated with those who advocate deconstructing binary thinking (i.e. clear lines between men/women, straight/gay, trans/cis, intersex/dyadic, etc.) and who celebrate the polymorphous, complicated, fluid, and sometimes conflicting sets of identities and desires a single person may hold.
3. A reclaimed word that was formerly used as a slur but is used by some LGBTQIA<sup>+</sup> people as a term of defiant pride. For decades “queer” was used solely as a derogatory adjective for gays and lesbians, but in the 1980s the term began to be used by gay and lesbian activists as a term of self-identification. Eventually, it came to be used as an umbrella term that included all LGBTQIA<sup>+</sup> people. Nevertheless, there are many LGBTQIA<sup>+</sup> people who see “queer” as a hateful insult and who do not wish to reclaim it. Could be considered offensive if used by heterosexual and cisgender people, however the emergence of “queer theory” and “queer studies” in academia has made “queer” a largely acceptable term in many academic and activist contexts.



**Questioning:** A person who is unsure of and/or exploring their gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or gender expression. Sometimes the “Q” in LGBTQ stands for “questioning,” though more often it stands for “queer” (see above).

These terms were taken and adapted from the following sources:

- Amplify, “Confused with Queer Terminology? Hope this helps!,” 2011, <http://amplifyyourvoice.org/u/lexiyouthresource/2011/01/15/confused-with-queer-terminology-hope-this-helps>
- Autostraddle, “Five Things You Should Know About Your Agender Acquaintance,” 2014, <http://www.autostraddle.com/five-things-you-should-know-about-your-agender-acquaintance-230899/>
- The Bowling Green State University *SafeZone Workshop Packet*, 2014.
- The Center for Gender Sanity, <http://www.gendersanity.com/diagram.html>
- Ohio State’s Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Student Services, glbtss@osu.edu, <http://multiculturalcenter.osu.edu/glbtss>
- “Trans, Genderqueer, and Queer Terms Glossary,” University of Wisconsin-Madison LGBT Campus Center, [https://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/Trans\\_and\\_queer\\_glossary.pdf](https://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/Trans_and_queer_glossary.pdf)
- Terminology sheet created by Eli R. Green ([eli@trans-academics.org](mailto:eli@trans-academics.org)) and Eric N. Peterson at the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside, 2003-2004, <http://out.ucr.edu/docs/terminology.pdf>
- TSER, “Gender 101,” <http://www.transstudent.org/gender101>