

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.

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 by clarifying how we are using various terms, rather than asserting that they represent the final or only definition of the various terms.

Agender – A person who sees themselves as not having a gender. Some agender-identified people see themselves as being gender neutral, rather than not having any gender, but in any case do not identify with a gender.

Cisgender – Refers to people whose Gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth (cis- from Latin, meaning, “on this side [of].” In contrast to trans, from the Latin root meaning “across,” “beyond,” or “on the opposite side [of]”).

Congruence - Gender congruence is the feeling of harmony in our gender (see more in "Understanding Gender").

Dimensions of gender – Our body, identity and social gender (how we present our gender in the world and how individuals, society, culture, and community perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender) are three distinct, but interrelated, components that comprise a person’s experience of gender. Each of these dimensions can vary greatly across a range of possibilities. A person’s comfort in their gender is related to the degree to which these three dimensions feel in congruence.

FtM – A person who was assigned a female sex at birth and whose gender identity is boy/man.

Gender binary – A system that constructs gender according to two discrete and opposite categories: boy/man and girl/woman. It is important to recognize that both cisgender and Transgender people can have a gender identity that is binary.

Gender dysphoria – First, let’s look at the word “dysphoria.” According to Merriam-Webster, dysphoria is “a state of feeling very unhappy, uneasy, or dissatisfied.” So, in the broadest sense, gender dysphoria is when someone feels very unhappy, uneasy, or dissatisfied in relation to their gender. This is something many people experience, including feeling a tension between how someone feels about their body compared to how society genders their body, or a conflict between how someone sees themselves in contrast with expected gender roles or expectations.

Gender dysphoria is related to gender congruence, which is the degree of harmony we feel in each dimension of our gender (see Understanding Gender for more information on the dimensions of gender). Gender dysphoria, which can occur in relation to any dimension of gender, can encompass a broad range of feelings, from mild discomfort to unbearable distress; the intensity, pervasiveness, frequency, and triggers of gender dysphoria vary widely from person to person. Feelings of gender dysphoria can, and often do, change over time. For example, an individual's experience of gender dysphoria may lessen as greater congruence is achieved.

If a person's discomfort or distress is negatively affecting their quality of life and relationships, they may want to get support from a trained, affirming gender professional. Keep in mind that "gender dysphoria" is also a clinical term and is found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (commonly referred to as the DSM, or DSM-5). The labeling of gender dysphoria as a disorder or condition has been controversial, but it is helpful to understand the term's clinical definition and use if you are considering support from a mental health professional.

Gender expansive – An umbrella term used for individuals who broaden their own culture's commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expression, identities, roles, and/or other perceived gender norms.

Gender expression – This is our "public" gender. How we present our gender in the world and how society, culture, community, and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Gender expression is also related to gender roles and how society uses those roles to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

Genderfluid – People who have a gender or genders that change. Genderfluid people move between genders, experiencing their gender as something dynamic and changing, rather than static.

Gender identity – our deeply held, internal sense of self as masculine, feminine, a blend of both, neither, or something else. Identity also includes the name we use to convey our gender. Gender identity can correspond to, or differ from the sex we are assigned at birth. The language a person uses to communicate their gender identity can evolve and shift over time, especially as someone gains access to a broader gender vocabulary.

Gender literacy - the ability to participate knowledgeably in discussions of gender and gender-related topics. Gender literacy is not about expertise so much as it is about a stance of openness to the complexity of gender and the idea that each person determines for themselves their own identity.

Gender role – The set of functions, activities, and behaviors commonly expected of boys/men and girls/women by society.

Genderqueer – An umbrella term to describe someone who doesn't identify with conventional gender identities, roles, expression and/or expectations. For some, genderqueer is a Non-binary identification, and for others it is not.

Intersex – Also referred to as 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 binary sex identity (male or female) by their doctors and/or families.

MtF – A person who was assigned a male sex at birth and whose gender identity is girl/woman.

Non-binary – An umbrella term for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine.

Sex – Used to label a person as “male” or “female” (some US states and other countries offer a third option) at birth, this term refers to a person's external genitalia and internal reproductive organs. When a person is assigned a particular sex at birth, it is often mistakenly assumed that this will equate with their gender; it might, but it might not.

Sexual orientation – Our sexual orientation and our gender are separate, though related, parts of our overall identity. Gender is personal (how we each see ourselves), while sexual orientation is interpersonal (who we are physically, emotionally and/or romantically attracted to).

Transboy – A child who was assigned a female sex at birth and has a boy gender identity.

Transgender – Sometimes this term is used broadly as an umbrella term to describe anyone whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. It can also be used more narrowly as a gender identity that reflects a binary gender identity that is “opposite” or “across from” the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgirl – A child who was assigned a male sex at birth and has a girl gender identity.

Transition – “Transitioning” is a term commonly used to refer to the steps a transgender, Agender, or non-binary person takes in order to find congruence in their gender. But this term can be misleading as it implies that the person's gender identity is changing and that there is a moment in time when this takes place. More typically, it is others' understanding of the person's gender that shifts. What people see as a “transition” is actually an alignment in one or more dimensions of the individual's gender as they seek congruence across those dimensions. A transition is taking place, but it is often other people (parents and other family members, support professionals, employers, etc.) who are transitioning in how they see the individual's gender, and not the person themselves. For the person, these changes are often less of a transition and more of an evolution. Instead of “transitioning,” a more apt phrase is “pursuing congruence measures.” A person can seek harmony in many ways:

- Social congruence measures: changes of social identifiers such as clothing, hairstyle, gender identity, name and/or pronouns;
- Hormonal congruence measures: the use of medical approaches such as hormone “blockers” or hormone therapy to promote physical, mental, and/or emotional alignment;
- Surgical congruence measures: the addition, removal, or modification of gender-related physical traits; and
- Legal congruence measures: changing identification documents such as one’s birth certificate, driver’s license, or passport.

It is important to note, though, that a transition experience can be a very significant event in a person’s life. A public declaration of some kind where an individual communicates to others that aspects of themselves are different than others have assumed, and that they are now living consistently with who they know themselves to be, can be an empowering and liberating experience (and moving to those who get to share that moment with them).

Transphobia – Fear, dislike of, and/or prejudice against transgender people.

Transsexual – This term is used in different ways in English-speaking countries. In the US, it is considered an older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities and is considered offensive by many people. Still used by some people who have permanently changed, or seek to change, their bodies through medical interventions, including, but not limited to, hormones and/or surgeries. Unlike the term transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word transgender.