

Trans Terminology

These definitions are not intended to be authoritative but are instead a starting place for dialogue. Individual trans people's own definitions and preferred terms should be respected.

Affirmed sex or Lived sex – The sex someone lives as. A person's affirmed sex is determined by the intention of that individual and does not depend upon the degree to which others recognize or acknowledge that sex. Transitioning brings brain sex and lived sex into accord.

Brain sex – The sex of a person's brain. Also, the intrinsic, internal sense of one's physical sex. Non-transsexual people tend not to notice or even be aware of their own brain sex because it is concordant with their physical sex. In contrast, transsexual people tend to be acutely aware of their brain sex as there is a mismatch between their brain's expectations and their external embodiment.

Body incongruity – An intrinsic, deeply felt understanding experienced by transsexual people that there is a misalignment between their brain sex and their physical sex. Most often described as a feeling that there is something "wrong" with the physical sex they were born into, or that they should be the other sex.[1]

Cisgender – Non-transgender people. People whose gender identity "matches" their sex.

Cissexual – Non-transsexual people. People whose brain sex matches their physical sex at birth, including gender non-conforming people who do not experience body incongruity.

Crossdresser – People who sometimes wear the clothing associated with a different sex, but who do not seek to live full-time in a sex other than the one they were assigned at birth.

Drag – Dressing as another sex usually for the purpose of entertaining others at bars, clubs, or other events. Drag kings are women who dress as men. Drag queens are men who dress as women. Referring to a trans woman as a drag queen is derogatory.

Gender – Socially determined characteristics generally attributed to a particular sex; these characteristics are often referred to as "feminine" and "masculine." What is considered "feminine" or "masculine" varies across cultures and time.

Genderqueer – People who identify as other than "man" or "woman." They may identify as both, neither, a combination or male and female, etc. This term is often used by those who oppose the rigid categories of man and woman and typically relates to gender identity and expression as opposed to the sex dissonance experienced by transsexual individuals.

Gender expression – A person's external characteristics and behaviors – such as dress,

grooming, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions that are socially identified with a particular gender. Also referred to as gender presentation.

Gender identity – A person's own internal sense of their gender, which may or may not correspond to the gendered stereotypes of the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gendering – The active, habitual, and generally compulsive process of attempting to assign everyone we encounter into the category of either male or female. More accurately, sexing.

Intersex (also known as disorders of sex development (DSDs)) – Describes the condition of people born with external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, chromosomes, and/or endocrine systems that are different from the typical definition of male or female. About one in 2,000 babies are born visibly intersexed and these individuals may be subjected to harmful, nonconsensual genital surgeries designed to make their genitals appear more typical. Most intersex people simply identify as men or women. Most trans people are not intersex and most intersex people do not transition, but it is possible to be both intersex and trans.

Passing – This word is sometimes used to describe when other people can easily and correctly identify the self-identified sex of a trans person. However, avoid this use as “passing” implies that trans people are deceiving people rather than being accurately recognized for who they are. “Passing” should be reserved for describing when a trans person is seen as their sex assigned at birth, such as a trans woman who can pass as a man on the job but otherwise lives as a woman. Many transsexual people are assumed by others to be cissexual while others are visibly transsexual.

Sex – The classification of people into the categories of “male” or “female” based on physical characteristics. At birth, infants are assigned a sex designation usually based on genitalia alone. Sex is far more complicated and includes the following factors:

1. Genetic or chromosomal sex—XX, XY and variations;
2. Gonadal sex (reproductive sex glands)—testes or ovaries;
3. Internal reproductive structures—seminal vesicles/prostate or vagina/uterus/fallopian tubes;
4. External sex organs (genitalia)—penis/scrotum or clitoris/labia;
5. Hormonal sex—androgens or estrogens;
6. Phenotypic sex (secondary sex characteristics)—facial and chest hair or breasts; face shape; fat/muscle distribution, etc.;
7. Assigned sex at birth;
8. Brain sex or self-identified sex.[2]

Sex dissonance – A form of cognitive dissonance experienced by transsexual people due to a misalignment between one's brain sex and one's physical sex. Sex dissonance differs somewhat from the psychiatric term “gender dysphoria,” which typically conflates this cognitive dissonance regarding one's sex with the mental stresses that arise from societal

pressure to conform to gender norms.[3]

Sex reassignment surgery (SRS) – A variety of procedures designed to change an individual's primary or secondary sex characteristics. Inquiring as to whether someone has had any form of sex reassignment surgery is inappropriate. Top surgery refers to chest or breast reconstructions. Bottom surgery refers to genital reconstruction or removal of reproductive organs. Feminizing facial reconstruction surgery is another form of SRS.

Sexual orientation – A person's physical, emotional, and/or spiritual attraction to those of either the same and/or different sexes. Sexual orientation deals with the sex and gender of the person someone is attracted to whereas brain sex and gender identity deals with how an individual experiences their own sex and gender. Trans people may identify as straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.

Stealth – Used to describe people who have transitioned and choose not to share that private information with others. They may do this out of fears of harassment, violence, discrimination, or because they do not identify as transgender or transsexual, but simply as a man or woman. This term is problematic because it incorrectly implies that a trans person is being deceptive and hiding something when in fact they are living openly as who they really are.

Tranny – A derogatory term aimed particularly at trans women. While some targets of the term may have reclaimed it for themselves, it is inappropriate for others to use this term.

Trans – Umbrella term inclusive of both transsexual and transgender people.

Trans man – A man who was assigned female at birth; a female-to-male transsexual man. Alternatively, a man of transgender experience.

Trans woman – A woman who was assigned male at birth; a male-to-female transsexual woman. Alternatively, a woman of transgender experience.

Transgender – Typically used as an umbrella term for people whose brain sex, gender identity or gender expression either does not or is perceived not to match societal norms of the sex they were assigned at birth. This term may encompass transsexual people, cross-dressers, genderqueer, and other gender variant people. Not all people who are transgender transition.

Transition – A process by which a person changes their physical sex characteristics and/or gender expression. This process may include a name change and a change in preferred pronouns. It may or may not include hormones and surgery. It may include a change in social gender expression through things such as hair, clothing, and restroom use.

Transphobia – Discrimination, hatred, or fear toward transgender and gender

non-conforming people. Transmisogyny is transphobia directed at trans women only.

Transsexual people – People whose brain sex does not match their sex assigned at birth. Transsexual people live (or desire to live) full-time as the sex other than assigned at birth. Most transsexual people seek to physically transition to the other sex through use of hormones, surgery, electrolysis, etc. Transsexual people have a variety of gender expressions and transitioning is unrelated to masculinity, femininity or stereotypical gender roles.

Transvestite – A term for a crossdresser that is considered derogatory by some. Avoid this term unless someone indicates that it is their preference.

Two-Spirit – A contemporary term that references historical multiple-gender traditions in many First Nations cultures. Many Native/First Nations people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or gender non-conforming identify as Two-Spirit; in many Nations, being Two-Spirit carries both great respect and additional commitments and responsibilities to one's community.[4]

[1] Adapted from Julia Serano, A glossary of sorts, <http://www.juliaserano.com/whippinggirl.html>.

[2] Adapted from Julie A. Greenberg, Defining Male and Female: Intersexuality and the Collision Between Law and Biology, 41 Ariz. L. Rev. 265, 278-92 (1992).

[3] Adapted from Julia Serano, A glossary of sorts, <http://www.juliaserano.com/whippinggirl.html>.

[4] Source: First Nations/Indigenous/Two-Spirit Collective, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, http://transequality.org/Resources/NCTE_TransTerminology.pdf.