Glossary of LGBT-Related Terms

The glossary is designed to provide basic definitions of words and phrases commonly used in discussions about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and related issues. All language is constantly evolving; new terms are introduced, while others fade from use or change their meaning over time. This remains true for the following terms and definitions. For terms that refer to people's identities, people must self-identity for these terms to be appropriately used to describe them.

Ableism: A system of oppression that benefits able-bodied people at the expense of people with disabilities.

Ally: A member of the majority or dominant group who works to end oppression by recognizing their own privilege and supporting or advocating for the oppressed population. For example, a straight cisgender person who supports and stands up for the equality of LGBT people.

Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction, but may experience other forms of attraction (e.g., intellectual, emotional). Asexual people may also identify as "bisexual," "gay," "lesbian," "pansexual," "queer," "straight," and many more.

Bisexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to two genders. For example, a person attracted to some male-identified people and some female-identified people.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity and expression are aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Classism: A system of oppression that benefits people with high and middle socioeconomic status at the expense of people with lower socioeconomic status.

Coming Out: The ongoing process that an LGBT person goes through, to recognize their own identities pertaining to sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression, and to be open about them with others.

Dyke: A derogatory term directed at a person perceived as a lesbian. It is oftentimes used against women who are gender nonconforming, with the assumption being that their gender nonconformity implies a sexual attraction to women. Many lesbians (of all gender-expressions) have reclaimed the term and use it as an affirming label with which to identify.

Fag/Faggot: A derogatory term directed at a person perceived as a gay man. It is oftentimes used against men who are gender nonconforming, with the assumption being that their gender nonconformity implies a sexual attraction to men.

Gay: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some members of the same gender. "Gay" often refers to a male-identified person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some other males. "Gay" should not be used as an umbrella term to refer to all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people; the term "LGBT" is more accurate and inclusive.

Gender: A set of cultural identities, expressions and roles – codified as feminine or masculine – that are assigned to people, based upon the interpretation of their bodies, and more specifically, their sexual and reproductive anatomy. Since gender is a social construction, it is possible to reject or modify the assignment made, and develop something that feels truer and just to oneself.

Gender Binary: A socially constructed system of viewing gender as consisting solely of two categories, "male" and "female", in which no other possibilities for gender are believed to exist. The gender binary is inaccurate because it does not take into account the diversity of gender identities and gender expressions among all people. The gender binary is oppressive to anyone that does not conform to dominant societal gender norms.

Gender Expression: The multiple ways (e.g., behaviors, dress) in which a person may choose to communicate gender to oneself and/or to others.

Gender Identity: How an individual identifies in terms of their gender. Gender identities may include, "male," "female," "androgynous," "transgender," "genderqueer" and many others, or a combination thereof.

Genderism: A system of oppression that benefits cisgender people at the expense of transgender and gender nonconforming people. Genderism may take the form of Transphobia, bias and discrimination towards transgender and gender nonconforming people.

Gender Nonconforming or Gender Variant: A person who has a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth. People who identify as "gender nonconforming" or "gender variant" may or may not also identify as "transgender".

Genderqueer: A person who has a gender identity and/or gender expression that does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth. People who identify as "genderqueer" may or may not also identify as "transgender".

Heterosexism: A system of oppression that benefits straight/heterosexual people at the expense of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Heterosexism may take the form of Homophobia or Biphobia, bias and discrimination towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Homosexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some members of the same gender. Many people prefer the terms "lesbian" or "gay", instead.

Identity: Identity is how we understand ourselves, what we call ourselves and often who we connect to and associate with. Each of us has a unique diversity of social identities based on our sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion and other important parts of who we are. Those identities develop over time, intersect with each other and help give meaning to our lives. Below, you'll find many common terms that people use to identify themselves, especially in relation to their sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. It's important to remember that these terms are about self-identification; no one can tell anyone else how to identify or what terms to use.

Intersex: An umbrella term used to describe a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive and/or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the medical definitions of female or male.

Lesbian: A person who is female-identified and who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some other females.

LGBT or LGBTQ: An umbrella term referring to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. Sometimes the acronym is written as LGBTQ, with the "Q" referring to those who identify as queer and/or questioning. The acronym can also include additional letters, in reference to other identities that do not conform to dominant societal norms around sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Oppression: Systems of power and privilege, based on bias, which benefit some social groups over others. Oppression can 1) take many forms, including ideological, institutional, interpersonal and internalized; 2) be intentional and unintentional; 3) be conscious and unconscious; and, 4) be visible and invisible. Oppression prevents the oppressed groups and individuals from being free and equal. Many people face oppression based on more than one of their identities, creating a unique complexity of challenges and resilience.

Pansexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some people, regardless of their gender identity.

Person of Color: A person who identifies as African-American/Black, Latino/Hispanic, Native American/First Nation, Asian and Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern and/or having mixed ancestry may also identify as a "Person of Color".

Preferred Gender Pronouns (PGPs): The pronoun or set of pronouns that a person would like others to call them by, when their proper name is not being used. Traditional examples include "she/her/hers" or "he/him/his". Some people prefer gender-neutral pronouns, such as "ze/hir/hirs," "zie/zir/zirs," "ey/em/eirs," "per/per/pers," "hu/hum/hus," or "they/them/theirs". Some people prefer no pronouns at all.

Queer: An umbrella term used to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms. While it is used as a neutral, or even a positive term among many LGBT people today, historically "queer" was used as a derogatory slur.

Questioning: A person who is in the process of understanding and exploring what their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and gender expression might be.

Racism: A system of oppression that benefits white people at the expense of people of color.

Reclaimed Words: As language evolves, some individuals and communities choose to identify with terms that had previously been used as slurs against them. The words are "reclaimed" and given new meaning, often imbued with a sense of pride and resilience. Examples include, "queer," "dyke," and "tranny," among others. It's important to remember that identity is unique to each individual; not all members of a community readily accept the use of reclaimed words, as they may still find them offensive and hurtful.

Sexism: A system of oppression that benefits male-identified people at the expense of female-identified people.

Sexual Orientation: The inner feelings of who a person is attracted to emotionally and/or physically, in relation to their own gender identity. Some people may identify as "asexual," "bisexual," "gay," "lesbian," "pansexual," "queer," "straight," and many more.

Straight or Heterosexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to some members of another gender (specifically, a male-identified person who is attracted to some females or a female-identified person who is attracted to some males).

Tranny: A derogatory term directed at a transgender person. Some transgender people have reclaimed the term and use it as an affirming label with which to identify.

Transgender: A person whose gender identity and/or expression are not aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth. "Transgender" is often used as an umbrella term encompassing a large number of identities related to gender nonconformity.