

UNDERSTANDING GENDER

Gender: A social construct that organizes bodies into the categories of man, woman, or some other identity. Gender does not depend on the sex one is assigned at birth. Gender changes over time and varies between cultures.

Gender Expression: How one expresses their self & their gender to the outside world. Gender expression could take the form of name, pronouns, clothing, hairstyle, behavior, voice, body characteristics, & other expressions. Gender expression can be characterized as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or in other manners. Gender expression does not necessarily match someone’s gender identity.

Gender Identity: A person’s internal and deeply held sense of their gender. A person may internally identify themselves as transgender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, bigender, male, agender, female, cisgender, man, woman, or some other identity. Gender identity may or may not correspond with the sex and gender one is assigned at birth. Gender identity is not visible to people.

Transgender: An umbrella term that refers to a broad range of identities and experiences of people whose gender identity and/or expression differs from conventional societal expectations based on their assigned sex at birth. Transgender people might be a member of their non-birth-assigned gender, have multiple genders, no gender, or a gender outside the gender binary. The term transgender does not determine or indicate gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life.

Trans: An abbreviation for transgender. For example, someone identifies as a transgender man may refer to themselves as a trans man.

Gender Non-Conforming (GNC): Someone who does not conform to the political, social, or cultural expectations of gender or gender expression in their society. GNC folks do not conform to a standard or conventional construction of masculinity, femininity, androgyny, or other gender expression. Not all GNC individuals are transgender, and transgender people are not necessarily gender non-conforming.

Gender Variant: A synonym for gender non-conforming. Gender non-conforming is preferred by many because gender variant implies that gender varies from some standard gender norm.

Non-binary: A person whose identity embraces the broadest of gender expressions and identities that resonate for that particular individual. Non-binary people can be similar to people that identify as gender expansive or gender non-conforming, or solely create new ideas and ways of being that are not restricted by gender.

Genderqueer: A person whose gender identity and/or gender expression falls outside dominant social norms. Genderqueer people have an identity that is neither male nor female, can either be between or beyond genders, or some combination of genders.

Transsexual: An older term originating from medical and psychological fields, the term transsexual refers to a person who fully lives in a gender or sex different than the one they were assigned at birth. The term may be preferred by some people today who either seek or have completed gender confirmation surgeries. Unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term.

Transvestite: An outdated term for someone who dresses either partially or fully as a member of a gender other than their assigned sex. Historically, while some transgender people identified as transvestite, the term was used within the diagnosis of medical or mental health disorders. Today, transvestite is usually as a slur; the term “Cross Dresser” has replaced transvestite.

Gender Binary: A system that upholds the view that gender exists in only two, opposite categories, termed “male” & “female” or “man” & “woman.” The gender binary asserts that no other possibilities for gender identity or expression exist. The gender binary is deeply ingrained throughout Western societies, and it is an oppressive system for anyone who does not identify with their gender and/or sex assigned at birth.

Two-Spirit: Generally, Two-Spirit is a term most people assume refers to Native American people who are transgender. However, this is an incomplete and limited understanding. The term Two-Spirit was adopted by pan-tribal LGBTQ indigenous groups in Canada and the U.S. around 1990 capturing hundreds of indigenous statuses. However, Two-Spirit people are not “modern inventions,” but rather have rich and distinct histories within Native American, First Nations, and North American Indigenous communities. Two-Spirit individuals can possess within themselves a masculine and/or a feminine spirit, and through their Creator, embody, experience, and see life through both spirits. Two-Spirit people can identify with any or none of the identities within the LGBTQIA spectrum, and being Two-Spirit acknowledges the fluidity of gender identity and expression. Two-Spirit also signals a movement away from heteropatriarchy and the gender binary – both of which reinforce Western gender and sexuality values – toward a reclamation of social structures traditional within Indigenous communities that recognized more than two genders. For instance, Two-Spirit people may have certain social responsibilities for the youth, elders, and adults within their tribal communities, such as reciting certain prayers, songs, and partaking in communal events to foster healing and balance. Given this context, people who are not Native American/First Nations/Indigenous cannot claim the identity for themselves.

Transition: An individual and interpersonal process transgender people undergo to align themselves with their gender identity or preferred gender expression(s). There are several aspects to transitioning; for instance, social transition may include changing one’s name and pronouns, legal transition may include changing ones gender marker and legal name on identity documents, and medical transition may include beginning hormones or seeking out gender confirmation surgeries. Transitioning has many more dimensions, and looks different for each individual. All forms of transition – or deciding not to transition – are valid.

Gender Expansive: An umbrella term for individuals who broaden commonly held definitions of gender, gender identity, expression, roles, and roles. Gender expansive individuals include those who identify as transgender, in addition to anyone whose gender expands their society’s understanding of gender.

Throughout the panels, certain terms are used in accordance to their historical context. For example, the term “transvestite” or “transsexual” was used by people who we might identify as “transgender” today.
Never assume someone’s gender; please, always ask first. As terms evolve, make the internet your friend to stay current!

These definitions were inspired by the LGBTQIA terminology resources from Williams College, UC Davis, Trans Educational Resources, and the Indian Country Media Network.



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