



# ISSUE BRIEF

## Use of Culturally-Appropriate Terminology for Gender Diverse Populations

Midwives provide care for individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Within a context of culturally-appropriate sexual and reproductive health care, midwives recognize the importance of asking individuals what words they use to describe themselves, their bodies, and their health care practices. The purpose of this issue brief is to provide definitions and resources regarding inclusive, non-discriminatory language. Links to websites from which midwives can obtain additional information are provided. Currently, many words are contested, even within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) communities, meanings have changed over time, and appropriate terminology will continue to evolve. This list is not intended to be inclusive of all terms used now or in the future, and every patient should be viewed as an individual and treated with sensitivity and respect.

**Agender:** without gender; gender neutral; identification as a person rather than specific gender. <http://gender.wikia.com/wiki/Agender>

**Ally:** person who supports equal civil rights, gender equality, and social movements for persons with sexual identities other than their own. An ally challenges homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. <https://www.pflag.org/sites/default/files/guide%20to%20being%20a%20straight%20ally.pdf>

**Binding:** flattening breast tissue to create a male-appearing chest using a variety of materials and methods; a fairly common step in female to male transition. <https://transguys.com/features/chest-binding>

**Bisexual:** attraction is not limited to one sex; other terms include pansexual, polysexual, omnisexual, and ambisexual. [Bisexual.org](http://Bisexual.org)

**Chestfeeding:** a gender neutral term to describe the act of feeding an infant at the chest; applicable to anyone but specifically inclusive of trans and gender non-conforming individuals who nurse their infants. <https://kellymom.com/bf/got-milk/transgender-parents-chestbreastfeeding/>

**Chest surgery:** also called top surgery; gender reassignment procedure to create a masculine or feminine chest. May involve breast removal (subcutaneous mastectomy), chest contouring, breast implants, nipple grafts, and nipple/areola resizing and repositioning. <http://www.topsurgery.net/>

**Cisgender:** opposite of transgender; denoting or relating to a person whose self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex. <https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2015/07/31/true-meaning-word-cisgender>

**Coming out:** process of accepting and telling others about one's previously hidden or assumed gender identity, gender affirmation, or sexual orientation. [Fenway Health](#)

**Crossdressing:** dressing in clothing and accessories that are associated with the opposite sex within their culture. This may be done for performance or for pleasure in private. Crossdressers may or may not identify as transgender or gender non-conforming; many are cisgender. <http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

**Gay:** homosexual; attracted to someone of the same sex and/or gender identity. <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/what-does-gay-mean/>

**Gender:** socially constructed roles and attributes associated with a person's sex. In many cultures only two genders are recognized, male and female. In actuality, gender can be expressed along a spectrum with many dimensions. Some individuals may identify with broader terms such as genderqueer, gender non-conforming, or non-binary. <https://www.genderspectrum.org/quick-links/understanding-gender/>

**Gender affirmation:** to be affirmed in the chosen gender regardless of sex assigned at birth through use of correct pronouns, gender expression, hormone replacement, and/or surgery. [UCSF Center of Excellence for Transgender Health](#)

**Gender affirmation or gender confirmation surgery:** use of hormones and/or surgery to transform secondary sex characteristics to more closely reflect gender identity; previously referred to as gender reassignment surgery or sex reassignment surgery. Objection to these terms by individuals who feel they are affirming their gender identities rather than being reassigned genders. [UCSF Center of Excellence for Transgender Health](#)

**Gender binary:** "A concept forwarded by transgender activists in the 1990s to explain gender-based oppression. The model states that all people in our culture are nonconsensually forced into one of two dichotomous categories (man or woman), and based on that gender assignment, we are all expected live up to the gender norms associated with that group. People who do not fit neatly into either of these classes and/or who fail to adhere to such gender norms (e.g., transgender and intersex people) are typically marginalized in our society." <http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

**Gender dysphoria:** "A psychiatric term that has been used (to varying degrees) since the 1970s to describe the discomfort and/or distress that trans people experience when they are unable to live as members of the gender/sex that they identify as or desire to be." Previously referred to as *gender identity disorder* in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*; revised in the latest version. Not all transgender individuals experience dysphoria so the term may be considered pathologizing. <http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html> [DSM-5 Reference](#)

**Gender identity:** internal sense of gender; may or may not align with sex assigned at birth. Gender identity is not limited to male and female; many individuals identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or agender.

**Gender expression:** outward expression of gender, including clothing and mannerisms; may or may not align with sex assigned at birth. Some transgender and gender non-conforming individuals do not outwardly express gender identity because of preference or concern for their safety.

**Gender Non-conforming:** refers to people or behaviors that defy societal gender norms. It is sometimes used as an alternative umbrella label for transgender or gender-variant people, especially when describing children (who may behave in a gender-non-conforming manner, but not yet understand themselves as being “trans” or as having a specific gender identity).  
<http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

**Homosexual:** exclusive attraction to members of the same gender/sex; primarily used as a technical term when distinguishing a person’s sexual orientation from those who are heterosexual, bisexual, and asexual.  
<http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

**Intersex:** reproductive or sexual anatomy does not conform to standard definitions of female or male. Concerned individuals and organizations have been working since the 1990s to persuade physicians to forego surgical repair on infants born with intersex traits, as these surgeries are largely cosmetic and lead to psychological and physical harm.  
<http://www.accordalliance.org/glossary/intersex/>

**Lesbian:** woman who is exclusively attracted to other women. Some lesbian women have reclaimed formerly derogatory terms such as *dyke* and *butch* and may identify more with these terms. <http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

**LGBT and variants:** ever-evolving acronyms often used when discussing gender and sexual minorities; originated in the 1990s, when bisexual and subsequently transgender activists began to petition for inclusion within what had to that point simply been called *lesbian and gay* organizations. <http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

**Queer:** reclaimed word that is often used as an umbrella term within LGBTQ communities. Generally, queer means not straight. It has political resonance as a term that challenges normativity, and makes room for fluidity in identity. Due to its historical and continued use as a derogatory slur, many LGBTQ people do not feel comfortable with the term; it should be used with caution by heterosexual people. <https://www.pflag.org/blog/about-q>

**Questioning:** term used to describe those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof.  
<https://www.pflag.org/blog/about-q>

**Sexual identity:** “Our sexual identity includes more than who we have sex with, and what kind of sex we have. Sexual identity is a broader concept referring to the ways we define ourselves sexually, not only in relation to others but on our own. Our sexual identity also may incorporate

who we look to for emotional and intimate love and support, and who we identify with in terms of desire, lifestyle, politics and more.” [Cory Silverberg, About Relationships](#)

**Sexual orientation:** describes sexual attraction only and is not directly related to gender identity. All people, including those who are transgender and gender non-conforming, should individually define their own sexual identities. [UCSF Center of Excellence for Transgender Health](#)

**Transgender:** an individual’s gender identity differs in some way from the sex assigned at birth. May be abbreviated to trans. A transgender man has a male gender identity but was assigned female sex at birth; a transgender woman has a female gender identity but was assigned male sex at birth. Not all transgender individuals have binary gender identities; terms such as *transgender and gender non-conforming* or *transgender and non-binary* extend the definition to include all gender identities.

[UCSF Center of Excellence for Transgender Health](#)

**Transphobia:** fear, hatred, disbelief, or mistrust of people who are transgender, thought to be transgender, or whose gender expression does not conform to traditional gender roles. Transphobia can prevent transgender and gender nonconforming individuals from living full lives free from harm. Transphobia can create subtle and overt forms of discrimination. For example, people who are transgender (or even just thought to be transgender) may be denied jobs, housing, or health care. [Planned Parenthood](#)

**Transman:** assigned female sex at birth but currently identifies and/or lives as a man.  
<http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

**Transwoman:** assigned male sex at birth but currently identifies and/or lives as a woman.  
<http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>

## Resources

- Center of Excellence for Transgender Health, Department of Medicine, University of California San Francisco: *Guidelines for the Primary and Gender-Affirming Care of Transgender and Gender Nonbinary People* [www.transhealth.ucsf.edu/guidelines](http://www.transhealth.ucsf.edu/guidelines).
- Fenway Health ([http://fenwayhealth.org/documents/the-fenway-institute/handouts/Handout\\_7-C\\_Glossary\\_of\\_Gender\\_and\\_Transgender\\_Terms\\_fi.pdf](http://fenwayhealth.org/documents/the-fenway-institute/handouts/Handout_7-C_Glossary_of_Gender_and_Transgender_Terms_fi.pdf))
- Julia Serano “There is No Perfect Word: A Transgender Glossary of Sorts”
- Planned Parenthood <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/sexual-orientation-gender>
- University Southern California <https://lgbtrc.usc.edu/education/terminology/>
- Trans Student Educational Resources <http://www.transstudent.org/definitions>
- University of Colorado Colorado Springs LGBT Resource Center <http://out.ucr.edu/docs/terminology.pdf>

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