

Rainbow terminology

Sex, gender, sexuality & other key terms

This is a list of terms related to sex, gender and sexuality, and their common definitions. Language is constantly evolving and words can mean different things to people who use them. This list should be used as a reference guide.

Sex

Endosex

A term describing a person who has sex characteristics (ie. genitals, gonads) that would have them classified as male or female at birth; a person who does not have variations of sex characteristics.

Interphobia

Discrimination against intersex people, or those with variations in sex characteristics. This may include making negative remarks about a person's sex characteristics such as body hair or chest. Interphobia also exists in medical institutions through performing non-consensual cosmetic 'normalising' surgeries on intersex infants and young people.

Intersex, variations of sex characteristics (VSC)

The term intersex is used to describe a person born with natural variations of sex characteristics such as chromosomes, reproductive anatomy, genitals, and hormones. People are sometimes born with these variations, or they may develop during puberty. There are up to 40 different intersex variations. Though the word intersex describes a range of natural body variations, many people will not identify with, or know, this term or related terms. In medical environments, variations in sex characteristics are known as 'differences in sex development' (DSD), though this terminology is widely critiqued by intersex activists for pathologising natural bodily development.

Sex

Refers to how a person's body is classified based on characteristics such as genitals, hormones, chromosomes, and gonads. People often conflate sex and gender, or wrongly assume that a person's sex always determines their gender.

Sex assigned at birth (SAAB), sex designated at birth (SDAB)

A phrase used to recognise a person's sex assigned/designated based on their external anatomy at birth. The phrase acknowledges that a person's assigned/designated sex may be different from their actual gender or sex.

Taihemarua

The Māori word for intersex.

Gender

Agender

A term describing someone who has an internal sense of being neither a man nor a woman, nor another particular gender; meaning 'without gender'.

Bigender

A term describing someone who can be any two genders at the same time, or switch between the two. Some bigender people use different names and/or pronouns for each gender.

Butch

A reclaimed term describing a person (typically a lesbian or queer woman) whose gender expression and/or identity, behaviours, and traits can be described as masculine. The term is often used in relation to femme, describing feminine expression, identity, and traits among lesbian and queer women.

Cisgender, Cis

A term describing someone whose gender aligns with that which they were assigned at birth. The opposite of transgender.

Cisnormativity

A framework of understanding gender that positions cisgender people and bodies as the 'norm', while marginalising people who aren't cisgender. This includes inferring that those who are trans, non-binary or gender diverse are not as normal or 'natural' as cisgender people.

Demiboy

A person who is partially, but not fully, a tane/boy/man.

Demigirl

A person who is partially, but not fully, a wahine/girl/woman.

Drag

The act of dressing in gendered (often exaggerated) clothing as part of a performance. This performance does not necessarily indicate a person's sexuality, gender, or sex. However, for many people, drag can be an integral part of their identity.

Femme

A term describing a person (typically a lesbian or queer woman) whose gender expression and/or identity, behaviours, and traits align with femininity. The term is often used in relation to butch, describing masculine expression, identity, and traits among lesbian and queer women.

Gender

How we identify and describe ourselves based on the roles, expectations and assumptions we are socialised into. We are assigned a gender at birth based on our sex characteristics, but not everyone's gender aligns with the one they were assigned. Gender is understood differently across cultures and throughout history.

Gender-affirming healthcare

An umbrella term encompassing transition-related healthcare and medical procedures which some (but not all) trans and non-binary people undergo to affirm their gender. This can include taking puberty blockers, gender-affirming hormones, or having gender-affirming surgery.

Gender diverse

An umbrella term for a range of diverse genders that exist outside of cisgender experiences, including transgender, non-binary, and culturally specific genders.

Gender dysphoria

The disconnect between a person's self-perceived gender and their sex assigned at birth. Everyone experiences dysphoria differently, but dysphoria can often cause distress, anxiety, depression, or trauma. These feelings are influenced by social factors too, such as the disconnect between how a person sees themselves and how others see their gender (e.g. being misgendered). The discomfort dysphoria can cause can be so intense that it can interfere with a person's ability to function in normal life, such as at school, work, or during social activities.

Gender euphoria

The positive feelings associated with the alignment of the way a trans or non-binary person sees their own gender and body, and how others see their gender; the opposite of gender dysphoria.

Gender expression

How a person expresses their sense of gender through their clothes, mannerisms, voice, and other forms of expression. Gender expression does not always align with a person's gender identity.

Gender marker, Sex marker

The letter or word representing a person's gender or sex (i.e. M, F, X) recorded on their official identity documents such as birth certificates and passports.

Genderfluid, Genderqueer

Terms describing someone whose gender is not fixed and may change over time. They may feel like both a man and a woman, and may feel more masculine on some days and more feminine on others, or a combination of both or neither. This depends on the individual.

Irahuhua

The Māori word for gender diversity.

Misgendering

The act of referring to a person as a gender they are not, such as through using the person's birth name, pronouns, or gendered language such as 'ma'am' or 'sir'. Misgendering is sometimes accidental, but can also be done on purpose to 'out' a trans person or invalidate their gender. Prolonged misgendering is a form of abuse, especially if it is done by multiple people. It can be distressing, traumatic, and endanger a person's mental health.

Non-binary

An umbrella term and identity used to describe people whose gender does not fit into a binary of man or woman. A non-binary person may or may not identify with the term transgender.

Pronouns

Words referring to someone in the third person. Common pronouns include she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs. In some languages, such as te reo Māori, pronouns are gender-neutral (e.g. ia). Some people use their name instead of pronouns, or neopronouns that are less commonly known such as ze/hir/hirs.

Tāhine

A relatively new Māori term, loosely translating to non-binary (a portmanteau of 'tāne' and 'wahine'). This term is used broadly so it can be used to describe a transgender woman, a transgender man, or a non-binary or genderfluid person.

Tangata ira tane

A term that some Māori people use to describe their masculine gender. This term does not have a Western equivalent, but is loosely translated to mean 'in the manner of a man.' It is best understood within its cultural context and may mean something different to each person.

Trans man, trans boy

A transgender person who was assigned female at birth but identifies as a boy or man.

Trans woman, trans girl

A transgender person who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a girl or woman.

Transfeminine

A term describing a trans person who was assigned male at birth but identifies, or expresses themselves, towards the feminine end of the gender spectrum.

Transgender, Trans

A term used to describe someone whose gender does not align with the sex or gender they were assigned at birth. The term transgender can apply both to those with a binary gender (man/woman) and those whose gender falls outside of the gender binary. However, not all non-binary or gender diverse people describe themselves as transgender.

Transitioning

Steps taken over time by trans and non-binary people to affirm their gender. Transitioning may include social, medical, and legal processes such as using a different name and pronouns, dressing in affirming clothes, changing one's name and/or sex marker on legal documents, hormone therapy, puberty blockers and a range of gender-affirming surgeries. Everybody's transition looks and feels different.

Transmasculine

A term describing a trans person who was assigned female at birth but identifies, or expresses themselves, towards the masculine end of the gender spectrum.

Whakawāhine, Hinehi, Hinehua

Terms that some Māori people may use to describe their feminine gender. This term does not have a Western equivalent, but is usually translated to mean 'in the manner of a woman.' It is best understood within its cultural context and may mean something different to each individual.

Sexuality

Aromantic, Aro

A term describing someone who experiences little or no romantic attraction and/or a lack of interest in forming romantic relationships. Aromantic people may experience other forms of attraction such as platonic, spiritual, sexual, aesthetic or mental attraction. This identity exists on a spectrum, with people experiencing different degrees of aromanticism.

Asexual, Ace

A term describing someone who experiences little to no sexual attraction and/or lacks interest or desire for sexual relationships or activity. Asexual people may experience other forms of attraction, such as platonic, spiritual, romantic, aesthetic or mental attraction. This identity exists on a spectrum, with people experiencing different degrees of asexuality.

Biphobia

Discrimination against bisexual people or bisexuality. This may include negative stereotyping or denying the existence of bisexual people. Biphobia can be perpetuated by people who identify either within or outside of rainbow communities.

Bisexual

Commonly understood to mean 'attracted to men and women'. A more accurate and inclusive definition is a person who is sexually attracted to people of more than one gender, or their own and other genders. Bisexual people can have differing levels of attraction for different genders.

Demisexual

A term describing someone who does not experience sexual or physical attraction to another person until they have formed an emotional or romantic connection with that person.

Gay

A term describing someone who is attracted to people of the same gender as themselves. Gay is also commonly being used by young people as an umbrella term that encompasses diverse sexualities.

Homophobia

Discrimination against gay or lesbian people, and people of other diverse sexualities. This may include negative stereotyping or denying the existence of gay and lesbian people, verbal or physical harassment, or microaggressions such as 'that's so gay'.

Homosexual

A term describing someone who is exclusively attracted to people of the same gender. The term can refer to someone who is gay or lesbian. While some people do self-identify with this term, others do not due to its history of being used in a clinical or negative way.

Heteronormativity

A framework of understanding sexuality that positions heterosexuality as the 'norm', while marginalising all other sexualities or forms of non-heterosexual behaviour and inferring that they are 'abnormal'. This can look like assuming that people are straight/heterosexual, or othering people of different sexualities through such things as referring to 'the gay lifestyle'.

Heterosexual, Straight

A person who is exclusively attracted to people of a different gender than their own.

Lesbian

A woman or gender diverse person who is exclusively attracted to women and self-identifies as such. This term was often used as a political identifier and its definition has expanded over time.

Pansexual

A term describing someone who is attracted to people regardless of sex characteristics, gender identity or gender expression; someone who is attracted to all genders.

Sexual orientation, Sexuality

A person's sexual identity, behaviour, and attraction in relation to the gender or genders they are attracted to. Sexual orientation and gender are different things. The term sexuality can also be used to describe a person's sexual orientation.

Other key terms

This list includes terms that are relevant to gender, sex, and/or sexuality more generally.

Ally

A person belonging to a majority group who advocates for members of a minoritised group. For example, an ally to rainbow people is a straight and cisgender person who supports and advocates for rainbow people's rights.

Coming out

The process through which a person discloses their gender, sexuality, or sex characteristics. Most people first come out to themselves before sharing this information with others. Coming out is a lifelong process for many rainbow people, rather than a one-off event.

LGBTQIA+

An acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more diverse sexualities genders, and sex characteristics. It is used in a similar way to 'rainbow', but is often critiqued for centring Western understandings of gender, sex and sexuality.

Microaggression

An indirect or subtle form of discrimination, such as a comment or action, which typically concerns members of a marginalised group such as ethnic, gender, or sexuality minorities. Microaggressions are usually unintentional but can still cause harm or reinforce hurtful stereotypes.

MVPFAFF+

An acronym used to encompass the diverse gender and sexuality expressions and roles across Pacific cultures. The acronym stands for mahu, vakasalewa, palopa, fa'afafine, akava'ine, fakaleiti (leiti), fakafifine, and more. Their meanings are best understood within their cultural context and may mean something different to each person. The following terms do not have a Western equivalent, but are loosely translated to mean 'in the manner of a woman':

- Fa'afafine (Samoa)
- Mahu (Tahiti/Hawaii)
- Vaka se lewa lewa (Fiji)
- Palopa (Papua New Guinea)
- Akava'ine (Cook Islands)
- Fakaleiti/leiti (Tonga)
- Fakafifine (Niu)

- Pinapinaaine/Binapinaaine (Tuvalu & Kiribati)
- Rae rae (Tahiti)
- Haka huahine (Tokelau)

These terms are loosely translated to mean ‘in the manner of a man’:

- Fa’atama/Fa’afatama (Samoa)
- Māhūkāne (Hawai’i)
- Binabinamane (Kiribati)

Outing

The process through which someone discloses a person’s LGBTQIA+ identity without their permission. Outing someone can put the person’s safety at risk and can have negative impacts on their employment, education, housing, and family situations.

Queer

A reclaimed word that is often used as an umbrella term encompassing diverse sexualities and genders. It can also be used as an individual identity for someone who is either not cisgender or not heterosexual, and is often preferred by people who describe their gender or sexuality more fluidly.

Queerphobia

Discrimination against queer people. Queerphobia may include negative stereotyping or denying the existence of queer people, or verbal or physical harassment. The term is sometimes used as an umbrella term to encompass homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia.

Questioning

A term describing a person who is exploring their gender or sexuality.

Rainbow

An umbrella term, like LGBTQIA+, describing people of diverse sexualities, genders, and variations of sex characteristics.

Takatāpui

A traditional Māori word that traditionally means ‘intimate friend of the same sex’. It has since been embraced to encompass all tangata Māori who identify with diverse genders, sexualities or variations of sex characteristics. Takatāpui denotes a spiritual and cultural connection to the past. It is best understood within its cultural context and may mean something different to each person.