Glossary of Terms: Transgender

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Please note: This guide was compiled by Nick Perrone using references from the GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 11th Edition. https://glaad.org/reference/trans-terms. Additional information included was provided by the SRJC Queer Resource Center (QRC) Coordinator. In order to maintain accuracy of source (GLAAD) information, the two sections which were modified are marked by an asterisk (*).

Glossary of Terms: Transgender

In order to understand many of the terms used by transgender and nonbinary people, it is necessary to understand the difference between sex at birth, gender, identity, and gender expression – and how those three things are not the same as sexual orientation. Therefore, those four terms are defined first, and then additional terminology used by trans and nonbinary people follows.

Sex at Birth
Infants are assigned a sex at birth, "male" or "female," based on the appearance of their external anatomy, and an M or an F is written on the birth certificate. However, the development of the human body is a complex process, and sex is not solely determined by anatomy, nor is it strictly binary. As many as 1.7% of people are born with an intersex trait. (See In Focus: Intersex People) Furthermore, a person's body can be changed through medical transition in ways that fundamentally alter the sex they were assigned at birth. (See *transition* below.)

Gender Identity
A person's internal, deeply held knowledge of their own gender. Everyone has a gender identity. For most people their gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. (See *cisgender* below.) For transgender people, their gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Many people have a gender identity of man or woman (or, for children, boy or girl). For other people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into one of those two binary genders (see *nonbinary* below). Please note: gender identity is not visible to others. You cannot look at someone and "see" their gender identity. See *gender expression* below.

Gender Expression
External manifestations of gender, expressed through a person's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, voice, and/or behavior. Societies classify these external cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture. (For example, in some cultures men wear long hair as a sign of masculinity.) Most transgender people seek to align their gender expression with their gender identity to resolve the incongruence between their knowledge of their own gender and how the world "sees" them. (See *transition* below.)

Sexual Orientation
Do not confuse and conflate sexual orientation and gender identity. They are not the same. Sexual orientation describes a person's enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity is a person's innate understanding of their own gender. Like everyone else,

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transgender people have sexual orientations; they may be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, etc. For example, a transgender woman who is attracted exclusively to women would typically call herself a lesbian; if she were exclusively attracted to men, she would likely call herself a straight woman. A transgender man who is attracted exclusively to men would typically call himself a gay man; if he were exclusively attracted to women, he would likely call himself a straight man. A transgender person who is attracted to more than one gender will likely call themself bisexual or pansexual.

Cisgender
An adjective used to describe people who are not transgender. "Cis-" is a Latin prefix meaning "on the same side as," and is therefore an antonym of "trans-." A cisgender person is a person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth. Currently, cisgender is a word not widely understood by most people, however, it is commonly used by younger people and transgender people. If you use cisgender in a news article, it is important to define what it means first, or you can simply say *non-transgender people*. Cisgender can be shortened to cis. We recommend only using the shorthand after you have used and defined the word cisgender for your audience. Note: Cisgender does not have a hyphen, nor does it need an "-ed" at the end.

Transgender
An adjective to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. People who are transgender may also use other terms, in addition to transgender, to describe their gender more specifically. Some of those terms are defined below. Use the term(s) the person uses to describe their gender. It is important to note that being transgender is not dependent upon physical appearance or medical procedures. A person can call themself transgender the moment they realize that their gender identity is different than the sex they were assigned at birth. (See *transition* below.)

Trans
Used as shorthand for *transgender,* and on second reference after first using the word transgender. If you use trans without defining it, or without the first reference of transgender, mainstream audiences may not understand its meaning or what you are referencing.

Transition
Transition is the process a person undertakes to bring their gender expression and/or their body into alignment with their gender identity. It is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time and the exact steps involved in transition will vary from person to person. Transition can include:

- **Social transition** – Telling family, friends, and co-workers, using a different name, using different pronouns, dressing differently, starting or stopping wearing make-up and jewelry, etc
- **Legal transition** – Changing your name and/or sex marker on documents like a driver's license, passport, Social Security record, bank accounts, etc.
- **Medical transition –** Hormone replacement therapy and/or one or more surgical procedures.

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These steps may also be referred to as *gender affirming care*. (See In Focus: LGBTQ Healthcare) It is important to note that being transgender is not dependent upon physical appearance or medical procedures. A person can call themself transgender the moment they realize that their gender identity is different than the sex they were assigned at birth. Some transgender people may not feel they need to take any transition steps at all, while other trans people may wish to transition but cannot due to cost, underlying medical conditions, and/or fear of consequences from transphobic family, employers, etc. Avoid the phrase "sex change." (See *gender confirmation surgery* below)

Transgender Man
A man who was assigned female at birth may use this term to describe himself. He may shorten it to trans man. (Note: trans man, not "transman.") Some may prefer to simply be called men, without any modifier. Use the term the person uses to describe their gender.

Transgender Woman
*A woman who was assigned male at birth may use this term to describe herself. She may shorten it to trans woman. (Note: trans woman, not "transwoman.") Some may prefer to simply be called women, without any modifier. Use the term the person uses to describe their gender. Trans women should not be referred to as "men "or "males" under any circumstance.

Nonbinary People
Nonbinary is an adjective used by people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the binary gender categories of "man" and "woman." Many nonbinary people also call themselves transgender and consider themselves part of the transgender community. Others do not. Nonbinary is an umbrella term that encompasses many different ways to understand one's gender. Some nonbinary people may also use words like agender, bigender, demigender, pangender, etc. to describe the specific way in which they are nonbinary. Always ask people what words they use to describe themselves. Nonbinary is sometimes shortened to enby. Do not use NB, as that is often shorthand for non-Black. Nonbinary may also be written as non-binary. Both forms are commonly used within the community and both are acceptable. (See In Focus: Nonbinary People)

Gender Non-Conforming
A term used to describe people whose gender expression differs from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. **Please note that many cisgender people have gender expressions that are gender non-conforming. Simply having a non-conforming gender expression does not make someone trans or nonbinary.** Nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming. Many transgender people have gender expressions that are conventionally masculine or feminine. Do not describe someone as gender non-conforming simply because they happen to be a transgender person. (May also be abbreviated as GNC.)

Drag Performance
A common misperception is that drag queens are always gay men who dress as women to put on a show and after the show they return to dressing and living as gay cisgender men. While many drag queens are gay cisgender men, drag shows have always included transgender women and other gender diverse

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people as performers. Some of these trans performers may have begun their careers perceived as gay men, and they were drawn to drag culture because it was one of the few places where their femininity was accepted and even celebrated. After understanding that they are trans women, many of these performers may choose to continue performing in drag shows for various reasons including financial reasons and because it was where they made friends and community. Prior to the community's adoption of the word transgender, these women may have called themselves female impersonators or showgirls.

Today, drag performance is more popular than ever, and the term *drag artist* is being used to recognize that drag is an art form that is open to everyone. Transgender women, cisgender women, transgender men, and nonbinary people all perform as drag queens. Drag king shows have also existed for a long time, but without the mainstream visibility of drag queen shows. In drag king shows, performers dress in masculine drag and portray male characters.

Unfortunately, many people continue to confuse and conflate drag queens with all trangender women who are often inaccurately described as "men in dresses." Most transgender woman have never performed in drag or been a part of that community, and they are therefore frustrated when people conflate their lives as women with drag shows performed as entertainment. Transgender women are women — and unless they are onstage performing in a drag show, they are not drag queens.

Culturally specific terms for gender diversity
Throughout history and in cultures around the world, there have been words to describe people who live as a gender different from the sex they were assigned at birth. When talking to people from other countries or to people in the U.S. from certain cultures, you may hear words that describe a gender diverse experience. For example, when speaking to a South Asian person, they may talk about the hijra community. Someone from Samoa might speak about being fa'afafine. A native Hawaiian might speak about being māhū. A person from Oaxaca in southern Mexico might talk about being a muxe. Many Native communities have words that describe people of diverse genders (e.g. wíŋkte, nádleeh, ininiikaazo, etc.). Two-spirit is also a word used by some Indigenous and First Nations people who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual. Judaism recognizes four genders in addition to man and woman: androgynos, tumtum, ay'lonit, saris.

It is important to be aware of the cultural specificity of these terms. People from these cultures may default to calling themselves trans men and trans women when they are outside their own cultural context, but they will use the culturally specific term when they are among those who understand its meaning. It is also important to acknowledge that many indigenous traditions of gender diverse people were criminalized or eradicated by colonizers. Work continues in those cultures to remember and revive pre-colonial traditions, and undo the stigma, criminal laws, and harm created by colonizers. In many Western cultures, gender diversity has either been distorted by observer bias or erased from history books completely. This erasure feeds the false anti-trans ideology that being transgender and/or nonbinary is a new phenomenon. It is not.

OTHER TERMS

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You may hear the following terms when doing research on transgender issues or speaking to an interview subject. Some of these terms are outdated and should be used with caution, unless they are in a direct quote. Some of them are terms that should only be used if your story is specifically about a certain topic (e.g. medical transition or health insurance.)

Transsexual (adj.)
An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. As the gay and lesbian community rejected homosexual and replaced it with gay and lesbian, the transgender community rejected transsexual and replaced it with transgender. Some people within the trans community may still call themselves transsexual. Do not use transsexual to describe a person unless it is a word they use to describe themself. If the subject of your news article uses the word transsexual to describe themself, use it as an adjective: transsexual woman or transsexual man.

Cross-dresser
An older term that replaced the offensive word "transvestite." While anyone may wear clothes associated with a different sex, the term *cross-dresser* is typically used to refer to men who occasionally wear clothes, makeup, and accessories culturally associated with women, but who do not wish to transition and present as a woman at all times. This activity is not drag. It is a form of gender expression and not done for entertainment purposes. Be aware of the differences between cross-dressers, drag queens, and transgender women. Cross-dresser does not describe men who perform in drag as drag queens. Transgender women are not cross-dressers and should never be referred to as such.

Gender Dysphoria
In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association released the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) which replaced the outdated entry "Gender Identity Disorder" with Gender Dysphoria, and changed the criteria for diagnosis. The necessity of a psychiatric diagnosis remains controversial, as both psychiatric and medical authorities recommend individualized medical treatment through hormone replacement therapy and/or surgeries to treat gender dysphoria. Some transgender advocates believe the inclusion of Gender Dysphoria in the DSM is necessary in order to obtain health insurance that covers the medically necessary treatment recommended for transgender people. Do not characterize being transgender as a mental disorder. Neither the American Psychiatric Association nor the American Psychological Association consider being transgender a "mental disorder."

In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), published by the World Health Organization, there is no entry for gender dysphoria in the mental health section. Instead, the ICD-11 has an entry for Gender Incongruence in the sexual health section. Gender incongruence is "characterised by a marked and persistent incongruence between an individual's experienced gender and the assigned sex, which often leads to a desire to transition, in order to live and be accepted as a person of the experienced gender, through hormonal treatment, surgery, or other health care services to make the individual's body align, as much as desired and to the extent possible, with the experienced gender." The United States is expected to adopt the ICD-11 in 2025.

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Gender Confirmation Surgeries (GCS)
Medical transition involves bringing a person's body into alignment with their gender identity and is only one part of transition (see *transition* above). One type of medical transition is hormone replacement therapy, prescribed by a doctor. Gender confirmation surgeries can be another part of medical transition. Not all transgender people choose to, are physically healthy enough to, of can afford to undergo surgeries. Replaces the outdated and offensive phrase "sex reassignment surgery." Do not refer to someone as being "pre-op" or "post-op." **Journalists should avoid focusing on surgeries. Unless the story is specifically about medical transition or policies related to healthcare access for transgender people, it is not relevant to the story.**

TERF and Gender Critical
Terms used to describe anti-trans activists who seek to limit full equality for transgender people and exclude trans women from women's spaces. The term TERF is an acronym for "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist." Coined in 2008, the word describes a particular type of ideology which existed well before the invention of the word. Anti-trans activist and author Janice Raymond articulated many of these same transphobic claimsin her 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Recently anti-trans activists have argued that TERF is a slur and have adopted the euphemism "gender critical" to describe their beliefs.

TERM TO AVOID:
"born a man," "born a woman," "biologically male," "biologically female," "biological boy," "biological girl," "genetically male," "genetically female"

Phrases like those above oversimplify a complex subject and are often used by anti-transgender activists to inaccurately imply that a trans person is not who they say they are. "Biological boy" is a term anti-trans activists often use to disregard and discredit transgender girls and deny them access to society as their authentic gender identity. As mentioned above, a person's sex is determined by a number of factors – and a person's biology does not determine a person's gender identity.

BEST PRACTICE:
These terms should be avoided in favor of a person's actual gender identity, for example: girl, woman, transgender girl, transgender woman, boy man, transgender boy, transgender man.

When describing a person's gender in relation to their assigned sex at birth, the terms cisgender, transgender, and/or nonbinary will usually be sufficient.

If there is a clear reason to refer to someone's birth sex, the terms to use are: assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth, or designated male at birth, designated female at birth.

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TERM TO AVOID:
"transgenders," "a transgender"

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Transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun. Do not say, "Tony is a transgender," or "The parade included many transgenders." Do not write "transwoman" or "transman." Do not capitalize transgender, unless it begins a sentence or is part of a name (e.g., National Center for Transgender Equality).

BEST PRACTICE:
transgender people, a transgender person

For example, "Tony is a transgender man," or "The parade included many transgender people." "Marisol is a trans woman" or "Mason is a trans man" or "Julio is a nonbinary transgender person"

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TERM TO AVOID:
"transgendered"

The adjective *transgender* should never have an extraneous "-ed" tacked onto the end. An "-ed" suffix adds unnecessary length to the word and can cause tense confusion and grammatical errors. Not using the "-ed" suffix also brings transgender into alignment with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer. You would not say that Elton John is "gayed" or Ellen DeGeneres is "lesbianed," therefore you would not say Laverne Cox is "transgendered." (Similarly, cisgender never needs an "-ed" at the end.)

BEST PRACTICE:
transgender

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TERM TO AVOID:
"transgender individuals" "a transgender individual"

Referring to people who are trans as "individuals" contributes to dehumanizing them.

BEST PRACTICE:
transgender people, transgender person

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TERM TO AVOID:
"Identifies as"

Avoid saying that transgender people "identify as" their gender. That implies that gender identity is a choice. Avoid "Marisol identifies as a woman."

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BEST PRACTICE:
Transgender people are their gender the same way cisgender people are their gender. For example, "Marisol is a transgender woman."

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TERM TO AVOID:
"transgenderism" "gender ideology"

These are not terms used by transgender people. These terms are used by anti-transgender activists to dehumanize transgender people and reduce who they are to "a condition" or a "dangerous ideology" that threatens "free speech." Learn more about the term "transgenderism" via GLAAD's Guide to Anti-LGBTQ Online Hate and Disinformation.

BEST PRACTICE:
Refer to being transgender instead, or refer to the transgender community. You can also refer to the movement for transgender equality and acceptance.

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TERM TO AVOID:
"female-to-male" "male-to-female"

This language is outdated. It implies someone is changing their gender from one binary gender to the other binary gender. In reality, the person's gender is an innate sense of self that has not changed.

BEST PRACTICE:
transgender man, transgender woman, transgender person

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TERM TO AVOID:
"sex change," "pre-operative," "post-operative

Referring to a "sex-change operation," or using terms such as "pre-operative" or "post-operative," inaccurately suggests that a person must have surgery in order to transition. Avoid overemphasizing surgery when discussing transgender people or the process of transition.

BEST PRACTICE:
transition

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TERM TO AVOID:
"Preferred pronouns"

Briefly the trans and nonbinary community did use this phrase. However, it began to seem as if cisgender people had pronouns, while trans people had "preferred pronouns." Everyone uses pronouns and they are a fact, not a preference.

BEST PRACTICE:
Simply say pronouns. As in "Please consider putting your pronouns in your email signature," or "I use he/him. What pronouns do you use?"

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TERM TO AVOID:
"Transgender rights"

People who are transgender and/or nonbinary are not asking for rights that are different from the rights everyone has. They are simply seeking full equality under the law and an end to discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression. Community members and allies may use the phrase "trans rights" or "transgender rights." However, media should be aware that anti-trans activists weaponize phrases like "trans rights" "gay rights"' and "special rights" in order to imply that LGBTQ people are demanding more or different protections and "rights" than cisgender, straight people already have.

BEST PRACTICE:
Equality and acceptance for people who are transgender. Transgender people are advocating to be treated equally.

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TERM TO AVOID:
"passing" and "stealth"

While some transgender people may use these terms among themselves, it is not appropriate to repeat them in mainstream media unless it is in a direct quote. The terms refer to a transgender person's ability to go through daily life without others making an assumption that they are transgender. However, the terms themselves are problematic because "passing" implies "passing as something you are not," while "stealth" connotes deceit. When transgender people are living as their authentic selves, and are not perceived as transgender by others, that does not make them deceptive

BEST PRACTICE:
Perceived as transgender, not perceived as transgender, perceived as cisgender

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EXAMPLES:

Avoid: "Marisol was born a man but identifies as a woman."
Best Practice: "Marisol is a transgender woman."

Avoid: "John's coworkers didn't know that he used to be a woman."
Best Practice: "John's coworkers didn't know that he is a trans man."

Avoid: "The clinic offers gynecological services for female-to-male patients."
Best Practice: "The clinic offers gynecological services for trans men."

Avoid: "The story is about a teenager who transitions from male to female in high school."
Best Practice: "The story is about a teenage trans girl who transitions in high school."

Avoid: "Beth grew up male and became a woman at age 25."
Best Practice: "When Beth was younger, she was perceived to be male by others. At age 25, she disclosed that she is a trans woman and began her transition."

Avoid: "The school board dismissed the parents' complaint that Imani, a transgender girl, was participating in school athletics with biological females."
Best Practice: "The school board dismissed the parents' complaint that Imani, a transgender girl, was participating in school athletics with cisgender girls."

Anti-Trans Terms Mainstream Media Should Avoid

Defamatory: "deceptive," "fooling," "pretending," "posing," or "masquerading"

Gender identity is an integral part of a person's identity. Do not characterize transgender people as "deceptive," as "fooling" or "trapping" others, or as "pretending" to be, "posing" or "masquerading" as a man or a woman. Such descriptions are inaccurate, defamatory and insulting. (See "passing" and "stealth" as problematic terms above.)

Defamatory: "tranny," "she-male," "he/she," "it," "shim," or "trap"

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*These words dehumanize transgender people and should not be used in mainstream media. The criteria for using these derogatory terms should be the same as those applied to vulgar epithets used to target other groups: It is preferred that cisgender people say, 'The person used a derogatory word for a transgender person', or 'The person used the T-slur'" in place of saying the actual word, as that slur is considered one of the most harmful, if not the most harmful, among most of the trans community.. Please note that while some transgender people may use "tranny" to describe themselves, others find it extremely offensive even when used by another trans person.