



Published on The Well Project (<https://www.thewellproject.org>)
<https://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/women-gender-and-sexuality>

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

Submitted on Mar 21, 2024

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Introduction

Human sexuality exists on a dazzling spectrum. There are many ways that individuals express, and describe, their romantic, physical, and/or emotional attractions to other people. While everyone is unique in the way they experience (or do not experience) attraction, there are groupings within the spectrum of sexuality that people may use to label that aspect of their identity. Labels can be awkward

– though they can also help people find others who identify in similar ways, to find community or intimate partnership.

In most areas of the world, sexual minorities (people whose sexuality is different from that of most people in society) have some experience of being marginalized (not valued, viewed as unimportant) or otherwise discriminated against based on sexuality. This is part of the reason why many people find it important to be connected with a community of people who share the experience of being marginalized because of their sexuality, even if the community may be diverse in other ways.

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Sexuality is complex and can be fluid (moving and changing over time). The same is true of gender identity, which is different from sexuality. There are many gender identities besides the traditional "woman" and "man" – and when we use these terms in this fact sheet, we are referring to cisgender (gender identity aligns with sex assigned at birth) as well as [transgender](#) women and men (gender identity does not align with sex assigned at birth), unless otherwise noted. For more gender identity terms and definitions, see the section [below](#).

Connection with other people is exciting – and so is the fact that there are so many ways to do it! There are many terms that have evolved to help people describe sexuality (and language keeps changing). Read on for some guidance through this network of language.

What Is Sexuality?

Even the word "sexuality" has several different but related meanings. People use the term to describe:

- people's feeling of being sexual;
- people's attraction to other people overall (also called "sexual orientation"); and also
- activities that have to do with being sexual

Here, we'll use the term primarily in the second way: to describe what and who people are attracted to when it comes to sex and intimate connection.

Sexuality Terms and Definitions

People do not all think about their sexuality in the same way, or in the same terms.

Here are some more terms that people use to describe their own and others' sexuality:

- **Asexual:** someone who does not experience sexual attraction toward any person, regardless of gender
- **Bisexual:** someone who is able to have ongoing physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions to people of the same gender and another gender; people may experience and act (or not act) on these attractions in different ways and varying strengths over the course of their lives; sometimes shortened to "bi"
- **Gay:** someone whose ongoing physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to people of the same gender; often used to describe "gay men" but can also be applied to women
- **Heterosexual:** someone whose ongoing physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to people of the "opposite" gender; also called "straight"
- **Homosexual:** clinical term to describe someone whose ongoing sexual attraction is to people of the same gender; has a negative tone due to its use by those who see same-gender sexual

- attraction as a sin or a mental disorder; considered outdated and offensive to many people
- **Lesbian:** a woman whose ongoing physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women
- **LGBTQ:** acronym that stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer"; in some cases, the "Q" stands for "questioning" (or the acronym is altered to add a second "Q")
- **Pansexual:** someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction to people of any gender; those attractions do not necessarily express themselves at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree
- **Queer:** used in several different ways to describe sexuality (including, in some places and in the past, as a derogatory term): some people may use it to describe their sexuality as not being exclusively straight; others use it because they feel limited in some ways by terms like "lesbian" or "bisexual"; often used interchangeably with "LGBTQ" as an umbrella term
- **Questioning:** someone who is in the process of discovering and exploring their sexuality and/or gender identity
- **Same-gender-loving:** some people prefer this term over "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual" for describing attraction to people of the same gender; sometimes shortened to "SGL"
- **Sexual minority:** person or group whose sexuality differs from that of the majority in society

It is important to keep in mind that the language of sexuality is not "finished" and is still being written. The same is true of gender identity (more on this below). [Language is a powerful tool](#) in shaping how we understand the world we live in. Much of the progress we've made in how we talk about and understand sexuality and gender identity comes from feminist thinkers and activists with strong connections to communities of sexual and gender minorities. Language is always changing as communities find more ways to describe these complex, and often hard to define, aspects of who they are.

The terms above describe different sexual **identities** (what group a person considers themselves a part of based on their sexuality), but sexualities are also made up of **desires** (who or what a person actually feels attracted to) and **behaviors** (what sexual acts a person takes part in). It might seem that all of these parts of a person's sexuality would line up neatly – for instance, if a person is attracted to women and has a sexual partner who is a woman, then that would mean she definitely identifies as a lesbian. But sexuality is less rigid than that in many cases.

A person may only have relationships with women but be attracted to men as well. It can also happen the other way around: A woman could be married to a man for years but may also feel attracted to other women though she may or may not identify as bisexual. People do not all think about their sexuality in the same way, or in the same terms.

In the United States, same-gender sexuality has become more societally acceptable in the past two decades, and the number of people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual is increasing as well for this reason. This is especially true among young adults (late teens to mid-30s). Millennials, people born roughly between 1980 and 1998, are considered the first generation to grow up during a time when LGBTQ acceptance had increased. The community of sexual minorities is also less likely to be white than the non-LGB population, at least one large survey has shown.

Research also shows that when surveys or studies ask people what gender they are attracted to or sexual activities they take part in (rather than asking them which group they identify with in terms of their sexuality), the population of folks who are not heterosexual gets even larger. It is difficult to say exactly why this is, but one reason may be that people may not feel that they are part of a larger group or community based on their sexuality, even though their behavior or desires may be the same as those that do identify as part of that community.

How Is Sexuality Different from Gender Identity?

Gender identity describes who a person feels themselves to be inside, regardless of what gender others assume them to be.

The letters "LGBTQ" include the "T" for transgender. While it is true that all these identities grouped together do exist in overlapping communities, it can also be misleading to group transgender with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer, because these are terms for sexual orientation. Transgender is a term describing a gender identity. *Gender identity is not the same thing as sexuality.*

While, as we've discussed, sexuality describes what types of other people a person is attracted to, gender identity describes who a person feels themselves to be inside, regardless of what gender others assume them to be. When people hear the term "gender identity," most think of "male" and "female." These are the two genders of the gender binary ("binary" means involving two things). While it may be what most people are used to, the gender binary is considered limiting and oppressive because it leaves no room for other experiences of gender identity.

In addition, society can deliver tough consequences for people who step out of the binary mold. For instance, it can be very difficult for people whose gender identity falls outside that traditional binary to find spaces that are safe from harassment and danger. In many areas of the world – including the US – transgender and other gender nonconforming people (see definitions below) are extremely vulnerable to bullying, inappropriate questions, harassment, and violence – not only in schools, homes, workplaces, and on the streets, but also from law enforcement and other authority figures when they reach out for help.

There are many gender identities beyond and even within the categories of men and women. A growing number of people are coming to understand gender – like sexuality – as a spectrum, not a pair of fixed points.

"Gender" often gets confused with "sex." A person's sex (usually male or female; in some cases, "intersex," see below) is the label they are given at or even before birth, based on biological characteristics like what body parts or chromosomes the person has. Gender is a broad term describing all the different ways in which societies and cultures expect people to think, look, and act based on their assigned sex. Again, a person's gender identity is who they feel themselves to be, regardless of society's expectations.

Gender Identity Terms and Definitions

Here are some definitions of terms having to do with gender:

- **Butch:** someone whose identity or expression leans towards masculinity; commonly associated with masculine queer women/lesbians but can refer to any gender
- **Cisgender:** someone whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth
- **Femme:** describes a queer person of any gender who presents and acts in a traditionally feminine manner; often associated with feminine lesbians/queer women
- **Gender expression:** how people choose to show their gender identity on the outside, through clothing, appearance, behavior, language, voice, or other outer characteristics; also called "gender presentation"
- **Gender minority:** person or group whose gender identity differs from that of the majority in society
- **Gender nonconforming:** broad term referring to someone who does not behave in a way that conforms to traditional expectations of gender – or whose gender expression does not fit easily into a single category
- **Gender spectrum:** full range of ways people may identify or express their gender; the idea that there are many gender identities beyond the gender binary
- **Genderqueer:** someone who rejects notions of fixed gender categories. A person who identifies

this way may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female, or completely outside these categories

- **Intersex:** umbrella term describing a wide range of natural variations of people's physical bodies that are different from the narrow definitions of male or female. In some cases, traits are visible at birth (for instance, a baby having genitals that are not clearly male or female); in others, they do not appear until puberty, or do not show on the outside at all
- **Nonbinary:** someone who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Nonbinary people may identify as being both a male and a female, somewhere in between, or completely outside these labels. Many nonbinary people also identify as transgender, though not all do
- **Transgender:** someone whose gender identity and/or expression is different from the sex they were assigned at birth (often on a birth certificate). Because gender identity and sexuality are two distinct things, transgender people may identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.
- **Two Spirit:** umbrella term used by some indigenous people in North America to describe gender identities beyond the binary of male and female

Sharing Pronouns

It is important to recognize the role of language when we are talking about gender identity, including pronouns. Pronouns (e.g., she/her; he/him; they/them) describe a person or thing, especially when they are not present. People often use pronouns based on others' name or appearance, without knowing which pronouns that person wants used.

While it is often true that people use "he" pronouns when they identify as a man and "she" pronouns when they identify as a woman, this is not always the case. For instance, a person may believe another person identifies as a woman and then find out they use "he" pronouns. Furthermore, a person may identify as a cisgender woman and use gender-neutral pronouns like "they/their." "Ze/hir" or "ze/zir" are other, less well-known pronouns that do not have a specific gender associated with them. Assumptions about people's pronouns are not always accurate and can be hurtful.

Just as people generally want to be called the correct name, referring to a person by their personal pronoun is a way to show **respect** for them. You can try sharing your own pronouns (or putting them on your nametag) when you meet new people. This invites others to share their pronouns with you, if they wish to do so. It also helps to challenge the idea that people can tell a person's gender identity just by looking at them.

In more and more group environments, people are asked to share which pronouns they use. This can be part of creating a setting that is welcoming to transgender, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and intersex folks, as well as others whose gender identity and/or expression is not tied up in the gender binary. However, because of concerns about harassment and violence described above, it is important to be aware that it may not be safe for some people to reveal that they are gender nonconforming by sharing their pronouns.

Sexuality and Stigma

In most cultures across the globe, there is some level of stigma against people who are not strictly heterosexual. This can take the form of casual, everyday assumptions that everyone is straight (heteronormativity). Such assumptions are common and show up in comments like "Where's your husband?" to a woman who may or may not have relationships with men. These interactions may seem harmless, but they reveal a widespread belief that heterosexuality is the "norm" – which makes it easier for anti-LGBTQ violence, and even policies and laws, to continue. Further, it is not always a woman's choice to be with a man. In some communities and circumstances, marriage may be forced on women and intimate partner violence may make it dangerous for women to leave a relationship. See our fact sheet on [violence against women](#) for more information.

In many areas, it is not safe for a person who isn't heterosexual to be open about their sexuality, or to behave in public with a queer partner the way straight couples would, for fear of violence. And in 69 countries (as of December 2020), same-sex sexuality is against the law. For example:

- In Tanzania in 2018, a prominent politician ordered the roundup and arrest of LGBTQ people in the country's capital city
- A 2023 Ugandan law imposes prison sentences on people found to have gay sex, requires neighbors to report anyone suspected of being gay, and criminalizes neutral acknowledgement of LGBTQ people
- A vague law passed in Russia in 2013 made virtually all public displays of queer identity illegal; numerous LGBTQ hate crimes followed. There have also been numerous reports of torture, and even some deaths, of LGBTQ community members by law enforcement in the southern region of Chechnya in recent years. Asylum applications from Russia to the US have spiked during this time and continue to rise each year.
- While the US is often a destination for people seeking safety from violence due to their sexuality, this country also has a troubling record of violence and biased laws against LGBTQ communities. For instance, transgender women are more than four times as likely to be murdered in the US than cisgender women and most of these victims are transgender women of color. And until fairly recent decisions by the US Supreme Court changed the laws, same-gender sexuality was illegal in many US states (until 2003), and same-gender marriage was not allowed in every state (until 2015). In 2023-2024, new anti-transgender bills were/are being passed in several US states.

Fears for their safety and lives lead numerous members of the global LGBTQ community to seek asylum outside of their home countries, in nations with friendlier policies and environments for LGBTQ people.

Still, even in countries where a person can go to prison for being who they are and loving whom they love, people continue to resist, form communities and organizations, and connect with and fight for one another. And there is progress: For example, in 2018, the Supreme Court in India unanimously ruled to remove a law that had previously made same-gender sexual relations a crime.

Stigma and Sexuality in the HIV Community

It is widely known that modern LGBTQ [advocacy](#) was shaped by early HIV activism. There were certainly gay communities and gay activism before the HIV epidemic. However, by the time of the epidemic's early days, many more gay men were closeted (hiding their sexuality) and in many places there were few strong gay communities. For a long time (and even nowadays in some areas), HIV and AIDS were believed by society to exclusively affect gay men. Stigma against being gay and having (or being vulnerable to) HIV fueled one another, and fanned the flames of public hatred and fear of these overlapping communities. See our [fact sheet on stigma](#) for more information.

Gay men coming out in massive numbers and being visible was an important tactic to fight for advances in HIV treatment, care, and policy. Men who fought to come out as gay and living with HIV (or who did not choose to come out themselves but were outed by others) regularly suffered great consequences, losing families, jobs, often their entire previous life. The HIV community as a whole owes so much to their courage and struggles, which continue to save lives worldwide.

Gay men continue to be the most visible face of the HIV community in many parts of the globe. And while the role of lesbian activists throughout the history of HIV activism is sometimes acknowledged, very little is said about women living with HIV whose primary relationships are with other women or transgender men. Because sexuality is fluid, some women whose enduring attraction is to other women may have previously been with men; but in the HIV community, there is often the assumption that women living with HIV must be with men or must desire to be. The extremely low likelihood of [HIV](#)

[transmission](#) between women during sex adds to this assumption – but not all women acquire HIV through sex.

Research has shown us that transgender women are highly vulnerable to HIV – roughly one in five US transgender women are thought to be living with HIV – and we need to continue and expand research and advocacy efforts to address their needs. For more information, see our fact sheet on [Trans Women Living with HIV](#). Transgender men are also vulnerable – particularly those who have sex with cisgender men. But transgender men's sexuality and HIV vulnerability are not well studied or understood. Aside from HIV, it is important to understand and document the experiences and unique health needs of all parts of our communities.

Another reality for many women, especially in the HIV community, is survival of sexual and intimate partner violence. Women living with HIV have much higher rates of childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and other traumas than the general population of women. Past or current experiences of trauma can change the way a person experiences their sexuality. On the other hand, for many women, naming and claiming their own sexual identity, on their own terms, is part of healing from past trauma. See our fact sheet on [trauma and HIV](#) for more information.

Finding Voice, Finding Community

Part of why there are such tight-knit communities of people based on sexuality is for safety reasons, to be able to identify spaces where people can go for support, to be themselves, to find others to fight for them when they run up against stigma and other challenges in the wider community. But because sexuality is fluid, how people identify may change over time. For instance, a woman who has been with men for most of her life may find herself in a relationship with a woman and building new connections with communities of lesbians and/or bisexual women. When people take steps to live in the truth of their sexuality – especially if the way they have lived before is different – they may worry that this will cause a rift with the communities they identified with before. It can be important to connect with communities that are welcoming of the diversity, as well as fluidity, of sexuality.

Because sexuality is fluid, how people identify may change over time.

Even today, when much progress has been made for women's and LGBTQ rights in many areas of the world, it still takes a lot of courage for women to be open about their sexuality and the truth of its complexity. If this is part of your journey, know that **you are not alone!**

There are local, national, and international groups that celebrate sexual diversity and affirm however you choose to identify. You can find some of those organizations below. Online communities of LGBTQ people have also flourished since the dawn of the Internet and may be more accessible than in-person groups for people who live in isolated areas or need to be quieter about their sexuality in their everyday lives. Social media platforms like Facebook, if you have access to them, are also good places to look for communities to connect with.

Several of The Well Project's *A Girl Like Me* bloggers have written about sexuality and gender identity – they share their voices so that others may have an easier journey. Whatever your journey may be with gender and sexuality, we hope that their experiences inspire you to be yourself and live your truth!

- [I Have a Secret!, by Gina Brown](#)
- [My Christmas Carol, by KatieAdsila](#)
- [4 Strikes Against Me...But I am Not Out! By Maria T. Mejia](#)

Special thanks to Tonia Poteat, PhD, PA-C, MPH, of UNC-Chapel Hill and The Well Project's Women's Research Initiative on HIV/AIDS, for their special consultation for this fact sheet.

Organizations Focused on Sexuality and Gender Diversity:?

- [Human Rights Campaign \(US only\)](#)
 - [International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association \(ILGA\)](#)
 - [International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex Youth and Student Organisation \(IGLYO\)](#)
 - [National LGBTQ Task Force \(US only\)](#)
 - [NGLCC Global \(National LGBT Chamber of Commerce\)](#)
 - [None on Record: Stories of Queer Africa](#)
 - [OutRight Action International](#)
 - [PFLAG \(US and Puerto Rico\)](#)
-
- [Getting Your Sexy On!! \(The Well Project\)](#)
 - [In U.S., More Adults Identifying as LGBT \(Gallup News\)](#)
 - [Allosexual, Demisexual, Bicurious — & Other Sexualities You Need To Know \(Refin...](#)
 - [The Body Is Not an Apology](#)
 - [LGBTQ+ Definitions \(Trans Student Educational Resources\)](#)
 - [Young Women of Color and Shifting Sexual Identities \(Contexts\)](#)
 - [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions \(Human Rights Campaign\)](#)
 - [What You Need to Know About HIV in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Peop...](#)
 - [Tools for Equality and Inclusion \(Human Rights Campaign\)](#)
 - [State-Sponsored Homophobia Report \(ILGA World\)](#)
 - [Sex and Gender Identity \(Planned Parenthood\)](#)
 - [12 Things People Get Wrong About Being Nonbinary \(Teen Vogue\)](#)
 - [Understanding Non-Binary People: How to Be Respectful and Supportive \(National ...](#)
 - [What Are Personal Pronouns and Why Do They Matter? \(MyPronouns.org\)](#)
 - [What Is the Difference Between Gender and Sexuality? \(verywellMind\)](#)
 - [Sex, Gender, and Sexuality \(US National Institutes of Health\)](#)
 - [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity \(youth.gov\)](#)



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