

Survivor Project



safety * empowerment * justice

Guide to Intersex & Trans Terminologies

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Quick Start

In our workshop, we use the following terminologies describing intersex and trans existence.

Intersex people naturally (that is, without any medical intervention) develop primary or secondary sex characteristics that do not fit neatly into society's definitions of male or female. Many visibly intersex people are mutilated in infancy and early childhood by doctors to make their sex characteristics conform to their idea of what normal bodies should look like. Intersex people are relatively common, although the society's denial of their existence has allowed very little room for intersexuality to be discussed publicly.

Trans people break away from one or more of the society's expectations around sex and gender. These expectations include that everyone is either a man or a woman, that one's gender is fixed, that gender is rooted in their physiological sex, and that our behaviors are linked to our gender. Survivor Project uses "trans" as a very broad umbrella term.

Transsexual people perceive themselves as members of gender or sex that is different from the one they were assigned at birth. Many transsexual people pursue hormone

and/or surgical interventions to make it easier to live as members of the gender or sex they identify as.

The term transgender is used in so many different ways that it is almost impossible to define it. Some use it to refer to people whose behavior or expression do not match with their gender. Some use it to describe a gender outside of man/woman binary. Some use it to describe the condition of having no gender or multiple genders. Other possibilities include people who perform genders or deliberately play with/on gender as well as being gender-deviant in other ways.

Respectful Languages

Here are some additional advice about certain "hot button" languages that you might want to think twice before using.

"Hermaphrodite": An old medical term describing intersex people. Many intersex activists reject this word due to the stigmatization arising from its mythical roots and the abuse that medical professionals inflicted on them under this label.

"Ambiguous genitalia": Many intersex activists contest the use of this phrase to describe their bodies because the ambiguity is with the society's definition of male and female rather than their bodies.

"True hermaphrodite" and "Male- or Female- Pseudo-Hermaphrodite": Medical sub-classification of intersex people, also called "herm, merm and ferm." Aside from the fact these distinctions are virtually meaningless in the lives of intersex people, these terms imply authenticity and ranking of intersex people and thus dis-empowering.

"Berdache": Used by Western colonialists to refer to Native American genders that they could not neatly classify into the eurocentric binary system of gender and sex. The contemporary language that is accepted by Native American people who identify with these genders is "two-spirit."

"Transgender": Some people use this term as the umbrella term encompassing everything from cross-dressing to transsexualism. However, enough transsexual people expressed unease with this term due to its anti-transsexual historical roots that we stopped using it as an umbrella term. We recommend using "trans" as the umbrella term.

Bottom Line

• These definitions are not fixed or universally accepted. They are presented to you for the purpose of communication, and should not be considered an authoritative source.

• We need to respect the rights of intersex and trans people to define themselves. Do not categorize people based on these definitions, but rather ask them how they identify and address them accordingly.

• Use pronouns preferred by intersex or trans people. Do not ever call them "it" or "he-she" unless they actually identify themselves as such.

• It is generally considered rude to ask someone about the shape of their genitalia, and this is true even when you are speaking to an intersex or trans person. Do not ask their medical diagnosis or surgical status merely out of curiosity.

• Do not make assumptions based on appearance, voice, etc. Do not assume that someone is intersex, trans, both or neither from external cues.

• Do not assume that "trans women" are male-to-female transsexuals (or "trans men" are female-to-male transsexuals), because there are many ways to be trans other than being transsexual. Someone who was assigned as female at birth and still identifies as a woman may call herself a "trans woman" if she does not fit into the society's definition of femininity.

• Intersex people and FtM trans people are often underrepresented in the discussion about intersex and trans issues. Do not let MtF trans people speak for others, and pay an extra effort to listen to intersex people and FtM trans people.

• Intersex and trans people, like any other groups, come from diverse backgrounds. Make sure that you are not just listening to the most privileged within intersex and trans communities. Avoid reinforcing racism, classism and other oppressions within these communities.

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