

## **How do we use the terms “sex,” “gender,” “sexual orientation” and “gender identity”?**

**Sex** is a biological concept that defines us as male, female, or intersex based on our chromosomes, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics. It is what leads doctors and parents to say “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” when we’re born. Intersex is an umbrella term to describe those of us who have elements of both male and female sexes.

**Gender** is what societies tell us about the meaning and expectations of our sex. Our masculinities and femininities are how we express our gender, according to the rules of our cultures and subcultures. This strict distinction is called the “gender binary.” If sex is biological, gender is learned and performed throughout the lifespan. Everyone, from children to elders, is expected to conform to the specific gender expectations of their sex. Retribution can be brutal for violating gender norms—not being adequately feminine (for girls and women) or masculine (for boys and men). Children of all genders are taught early to accept male dominance in many areas of life, from religion to politics to sexuality. Women, girls, and gender-expansive people are physically and mentally healthiest in the absence of rigid gender norms.

**Sexuality** is a state of being, a way of experiencing and giving pleasure to ourselves and others. It has the potential to be a powerful and positive force that deepens intimate connections and aliveness. It can also be a source of great pain. The term sexuality can refer to our sexual orientation, the way we express our erotic feelings and desires, or the physical and psychological components of sex and sensuality. Sexuality is also connected to reproductive health. Good sexual and reproductive health mean that everyone has safer sex lives and the freedom to decide if and when we want to have children.

**Sexual orientation** is defined by who we desire, who we have sex with, and which identities and communities we identify with. If we desire and/or are sexually involved with members of the same sex, and/or if we identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, then we are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. People who don’t have sexual feelings are asexual (or ace). If we desire and/or are sexually involved with members of the “opposite” sex, and if we do not identify otherwise, then we are heterosexual or straight. Any of these identities may change over time or they may stay the same.

**Gender identity** is how we recognize and experience our own gender. Usually, our gender identity matches with what other people tell us we are: we have a vulva and breasts, and we identify as women. But how much of that is due to social pressure? Many people don’t identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Others don’t identify as either male or female, man or woman. Of course, many women don’t accept the gender expectations placed on us by society. We may chafe against the sexist expectations of our families, workplaces, religions, etc. This doesn’t change our gender identity—we are still women just as much as conventionally feminine women. Gender identity is a subjective experience regarding who we are, and it’s important to believe and respect the autonomy of people when they tell us their gender identities.



The terms we use to talk about sex, gender, and sexual orientation are evolving and multiplying, and vary widely depending on time, place, and the communities we're part of. There are many good lists of terms, but the most important thing is to respect the language each person uses about their own identity.