

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity-related Terms and Concepts

Facilitator Note: *Within most cultures, there are specific terms and usages that should be identified and included on this definition sheet. See references at the end of this handout for suggested sources.*

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles, and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, and religious and spiritual factors. (World Health Organization Working Definition, 2006.)

Gender Identity refers to a person's internal, deeply felt sense of being a man or woman, or something other or in between, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. Because gender identity is internal and personally defined, it is not visible to others. (Adapted from Currah, Paisley and Shannon Minter. 2000. *Transgender Equality: A Handbook for Activists and Policymakers*. San Francisco: National Center for Lesbian Rights and The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.)

Gender Expression refers to all of the external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as either masculine or feminine, such as dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions. A person's gender expression may or may not match his/her gender identity or his/her biological sex. (Adapted from Currah and Minter, 2000.)

Sexual Orientation is the organization of a person's eroticism and emotional attachment with reference to the sex and gender of their desired partner, whether a person's primary attraction is to the opposite sex (**heterosexuality**), the same sex (**homosexuality**), or both sexes (**bisexuality**).

Gay is a term used in many parts of the English-speaking world to refer to the people, practices, and cultures of homosexuality. It was adopted as an identity in the West by people who are attracted to members of the same sex. Gay can refer to women or men, but is sometimes used to specify men who identify as gay, as opposed to women who identify as gay (**lesbians**). The abbreviation LGBT/GLBT is often used to refer to communities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. (Adapted from UNDP and UNAIDS. Forthcoming, 2010. *Universal Access: From Vulnerability to Resilience: Strategic Framework for Strengthening National Responses to HIV for Gay Men, Other MSM, and Trans People in Latin America and the Caribbean*. UNDP and UNAIDS.)

Men who have sex with men (MSM) is an epidemiological category that refers to behavior rather than identity. It is thus inclusive of all adult males who engage in consensual male-to-male sex, including those self-identifying as gay, bisexual, or

heterosexual in their sexual orientation, and including people who are biologically male regardless of gender identity. (UNDP and UNAIDS, forthcoming 2010)¹

Women who have sex with women (WSW) is an epidemiological category that refers to behavior rather than identity. It is thus inclusive of all adult females who engage in consensual female-to-female sex, including those self-identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual in their sexual orientation.

Transgender refers collectively to people who challenge strict gender norms by behaving as effeminate men or masculine women, adapting “third gender” roles, or embarking on hormonal and surgical treatment to adjust their bodies to the form of the desired sex. Transgender persons often find that the sex assigned to them at birth does not correspond with the innate sense of gender identity they experience in life. Transgender may include **transsexuals** (people whose physical sex and gender identity as a man or a woman conflict); **transvestites** (people who cross-dress for sexual gratification but do not wish to be a person of the other sex); and **intersex persons** (people whose sexual anatomy is neither exclusively male nor exclusively female). (Adapted from UNDP and UNAIDS, forthcoming 2010.)

Homophobia is the fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuals or homosexual behavior or cultures. Homophobia also refers to self-loathing by homosexuals, as well as the fear of people who live outside of society’s standards of what it is to be a “true man” or “true woman.”

Heterosexism is the presumption that everyone is heterosexual and/or the belief that heterosexual people are naturally superior to homosexual and bisexual people.

Heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual norms are universal and normal, and that these norms are the standard for legitimate social and sexual relations.

References

Please see resources such as the following to amend these terms to reflect the local context, including local terms for women who have sex with women:

Naz Foundation. 2001. “MSM and Gay Men’s Sexual Behaviors/Identities.” P.43 in *Training Manual: An Introduction to Promoting Sexual Health for Men Who Have Sex with Men and Gay Men*. New Delhi: Naz Foundation.

¹ The acronym MSM should be used with an understanding of its limitations; namely, terms aimed at describing objective biological or behavioral facts may not capture socially or individually constructed identities of sexuality and gender; people frequently transition in and out of behaviors and identities, and may not self-identify by their behaviors; behavior-based terms can obscure many other issues related to both health and rights, such as youth, poverty, sex work, drug use, social inequality, homelessness, violence, and incarceration; and internationally generalized terms frequently obscure diversities in people’s needs, ambitions, and vulnerabilities.

Pact, Inc and International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). 2010. "Sex, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sexual Orientation." P.150 in *Understanding and Challenging Stigma toward Men Who Have Sex with Men: Toolkit for Action* (Adapted version for use in Cambodia). Washington, DC: Pact, Inc and ICRW.

