

# Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People

## EXPANDED INFORMATION

**Note:** This is an expanded version of the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) resource

Terminology used to refer to transgender and gender-non-conforming people is continually changing to reflect new understandings within the community as well as evolving societal and cultural environments.

## Definitions

### What does *transgender* mean?

*Transgender* (sometimes *transgendered*) is a word used by many people whose self-experienced gender does not match the gender that they were assigned at birth. For example, a transgender person might be someone who identifies and lives as a woman but whose birth-assigned sex was male. Other transgender people identify as somewhere in between the societally recognized genders of man and woman, as neither, or as one gender at some times and another at other times. *Transgender* is the large category used to cover all of these experiences.

### What does *gender non-conforming* mean?

Some people hold gender identities that are the same as their birth-assigned sex, but do not express their gender identity in ways that conform to societal and/or cultural expectations. Gender non-conforming is often used to describe these people.

### What does *transsexual* mean?

*Transsexual* is usually used by someone who was assigned as male or female and identifies fully as and seeks transition to the other. Transsexual people might identify as male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM).

### What does *trans\** mean?

*Trans\** is a relatively new general term used to refer to transgender and gender non-conforming people.

### What does *cisgender* mean?

*Cisgender* describes a person whose birth-assigned sex and gender identity are the same. For example, a person whose birth-assigned sex is female and who holds a feminine gender identity is a cisgender person.

The terms *sex* and *gender identity* do not mean the same thing. *Sex* is a biological term used to describe a person's body and is defined by a person's chromosomes, hormones, brain sex, secondary sex characteristics, reproductive organs and genitalia. *Gender identity* is a cultural construct that refers to a person's internal sense of self.

### What other identity words do transgender people use?

First, it is very important to let an individual person or group identify themselves with whatever words they choose and to let the person or persons define what those words mean for them. It is equally important to believe and respect that self-definition.

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The following definitions may or may not match with a specific individual's or group's own self-definition, but they offer a place to start. Here are some identity words used by communities as those communities have articulated their identities:

- *Transgender* itself is often used as a main self-label for gender. Typically, a person who uses the word *transgender* as a main label lives as FTM or MTF and may or may not identify as transsexual. It is important to note that some persons who identify as transsexual do not wish to call themselves transgender and may not consider themselves trans- at all.
- *Cross-dresser (CD)*: This refers to someone who spends some time as one gender and identifies and presents as another gender at other times. Typically this is a person assumed to be a male who dresses and identifies as a female at other times. These people have no desire to modify their bodies through hormonal or surgical intervention. However, many people who begin exploring their cross-dresser identity do so as a step in the process toward transition (see below for definition of transition).
- *Drag queen*: A drag queen is a person (typically male, but may be FTM, MTF, or female) who performs or entertains as stereotypically female, who may or may not identify this as a part of their gender identity.
- *Drag king*: A drag king is a person who performs or entertains as stereotypically male (typically female or FTM, although can be MTF or male).
- *Two spirit or terms from Native American or other cultures*: Different cultures define sexuality and gender in ways that don't follow a binary gender system. It is important to use the terms preferred by a person and seek to understand the cultural implications rather than using the terms you prefer.
- *Genderqueer*: This refers to someone who identifies between male and female, neither, or both. This fluidity may be in time (identifying as male sometimes, female other times, and neither other times) or may be complex but static (identifying as in the middle all the time).

Genderqueer people may or may not appear gender-nonconformist at any given time. Most genderqueer people use descriptions to explain how they view their own gender. Some genderqueer people choose to use gender-neutral pronouns or no pronouns for themselves. Others may prefer the pronouns *they*, *them* and *their*, or ask that their name be used instead of pronouns.

#### **One set of neutral pronouns:**

*Ze* (pronounced *ZEE*) instead of *he* or *she*

*Zir* (pronounced *ZEER*) instead of *him* or *her*

#### **Another set used by others:**

*Sie* (*SEE*)

*Hir* (*HERE*)

### **But isn't *queer* a pejorative word?**

Any word can be used as an insult. Although *queer* has been used as an insult against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, many people now use it as a positive self-identity. People who identify as *genderqueer* or just *queer* typically do so for one of the following reasons:

- There is no better word to describe their sexual or gender identity otherwise (for example, a genderqueer person attracted to other genderqueer people).
- Identification with a growing community that refers to itself as queer or genderqueer politically, not identifying with the mainstream LGBT movement
- Not wanting to limit to a label that might not be fully accurate or that may change over time
- Many young people now hear the words *lesbian* or *gay* used as insults and so prefer not to use those words to self-identify. *Queer* describes being different with pride.
- Queer may also be used as a verb to describe the action of interfering with or disrupting. For example, the queer community "queers" dominant cultural symbols.

## TWO CAUTIONS:

1. It is never acceptable to refer to someone as queer or genderqueer without his/her permission.
2. Many people who identify as queer or genderqueer only use those labels in certain contexts. For example: Someone may use *queer* at school but use *bisexual* at church.

### Are there terms to avoid?

*Tranny* is used as a pejorative term in reference to transgender and gender non-conforming people, especially those with a male-birth-assigned sex who present themselves with a feminine gender expression. *Transvestite* is an older, more offensive term for cross-dresser. *Berdache* is a term of colonization used for non-conforming Native Americans and is thus is offensive.

### What is intersex? How is intersex different from transgender?

“Technically, intersex is defined as ‘congenital anomaly of the reproductive and sexual system.’ Intersex people are born with external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or endocrine system that are different from most other people. There is no single ‘intersex body’; it encompasses a wide variety of conditions that do not have anything in common except that they are deemed ‘abnormal’ by the society. What makes intersex people similar is their experiences of medicalization, not biology. ... While some intersex people do reclaim it as part of their identity, it is not a freely chosen category of gender—it can only be reclaimed. Most intersex people identify as men or women.”<sup>1</sup>

It is also important to note that not all intersex conditions are accompanied by ambiguous external genitalia. Chromosomal variations that are classified as intersex, such as Turner Syndrome in women (XO), do not manifest themselves in ambiguous external genitalia.

People with intersex conditions may or may not identify as transgender, depending on their experiences and community affiliation. *It is important*

<sup>1</sup> From Emi Koyoma, [www.intersexinitiative.org/articles/intersex-faq.html](http://www.intersexinitiative.org/articles/intersex-faq.html)

*not to assume that an intersex person identifies as transgender (or vice versa).*

## Common Confusions

### Is that a man or a woman?

For reasons of biology, age, ethnicity, culture, health, or financial restrictions, many transgender people do not *pass* as the gender that matches one’s identity, and for others *passing* isn’t a goal for identity reasons. It is most respectful to ask the person directly. Try asking, “How do you identify your gender?” or “How do you prefer to be referred to?”

When someone shares one’s own identity, honor that self-understanding by using the same words and use pronouns and titles that match. Even when someone chooses not to answer or identifies as genderqueer, as both, or as neither, respect that person’s answer and identity. Don’t choose a gender, but accept the answer. Use a person’s preferred pronouns or no pronouns. The pronoun “it” is dehumanizing and never appropriate for a person.

### How can someone be both or neither gender?

For many, the question is, “How can everyone fit into just two categories?” In every culture in every time, there have been people whose gender identities didn’t fit into one of two categories that corresponded with their physical anatomies.<sup>2</sup> Some cultures have recognized and honored such people, and others have been viewed as outcasts. Most societies today make life very difficult for gender non-conformers, whether the nonconformity is by biology or identity. For example, most places have only men’s and women’s restrooms, most written forms have only an “M” box and an “F” box, and English pronouns are only male, female, or plural.

However, people are creative and find ways to identify and/or present as identities other than male or female. Co-workers and families can learn to use gender-neutral names, and people choose which

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the historical and cultural gender variations, see: Leslie Feinberg. *Transgender Warriors*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

restroom to use based on safety. Other people choose to identify as transgender but simplify their presentation and identity in some situations, or have different gender presentations in different settings.

### **Why do some people present as one gender one day and another gender another day?**

Some people express different parts of identities at different times and may call themselves cross-dressers. Other people feel in-between or outside the male/female genders and may use words like *genderqueer* or *androgynous* to explain their identity, which may lead to dressing in different ways at different times. Other people who identify as transsexual or otherwise transgender may not feel comfortable or safe in their preferred gender presentation in all situations and so may only dress as preferred in safe situations, like at transgender groups or home.

### **When cross-dressers speak as if they are two people (a male person and a female person) in the same body, does this mean that they have multiple-personality disorder?**

Usually, no. Just as the masculine and feminine in society are often arbitrary distinctions (as in jobs and social roles), so the cross-dresser will often assign masculine and feminine traits to separate *personalities*. This is merely a convenience, providing a shorthand way of referring to these collections of their masculine and feminine traits. The vast majority of cross-dressers do not have the mental illness of multiple personalities (dissociative identity disorder), but like any population, a small number may also have this disorder. It is best to assume that someone who speaks of separate identities is speaking of healthy cross-dressing, not such a disorder.

### **Why do transgender people have to be so confusing?**

### **Why identify as a cross-dresser (or genderqueer, etc.) and make things more complicated?**

People whose gender doesn't fit society's expectations are not making things more complicated—the identities just *are* more complex than typical. On the other hand, isn't it pretty

complicated already to be a woman who is an athlete sometimes, a mother at other times, and a wife at other times (let alone trying to integrate the three identities at the same time)? Everyone's identities, including gender identities, are more complex than society acknowledges. For transgender people who do not fit the expectations of being only male or only female, that complexity simply seems more visible. Unless someone is in the early stages of figuring out their own gender identity, transgender persons are rarely confused about personal identities. Calling someone "confusing" or "confused" (because we do not understand how someone identifies) is projecting our emotions onto that person.

### **Why are transgender people so exaggerated in appearance?**

It is never appropriate to call someone's gender expression "exaggerated." Some transgender people who have been oppressed in gender expression for most of their lives choose more feminine or masculine presentation in expression of newfound freedom, while others simply like how it looks and feels. Others feel that they pass better in more obviously gendered clothing.

## **Gender Transition**

### **What is gender transition?**

Gender transition is the process by which a person internally, socially, and/or physically changes gender identity and/or presentation. How, in what order, and what kinds of transition a person chooses depend on internal factors like identity and health but are also heavily influenced by outside factors like age restrictions, access to general medical care, insurance, geographical access, economic factors, and family considerations.

### **Why transition?**

Many people transition because their self-understandings did not fit how other people viewed them. Transgender people transition for a variety of reasons, including:

- Physical self not matching internal self
- Not being able to reconcile self-image with physiology

- Feeling bodily uncomfortable regarding sex characteristics
- Feeling socially uncomfortable or incongruent
- Feeling untruthful, feeling like having to keep a secret
- Seeking greater personal safety
- Seeking better health, physically and/or mentally
- Seeking spiritual wholeness that is not disembodied

## **How long does it take to transition?**

The time period is as unique as each person. It depends on the person's wishes, resources and medical history along with a host of other factors. For people who choose to transition socially, it depends on how long it takes others to use the correct name and pronouns. For people who transition medically, the most widely followed medical guidelines say that it needs to take at least one and a half years for surgeries.<sup>3</sup> Hormonal transition may start soon after six months of therapy, but full changes typically take many years, and hormones are continued indefinitely.

## **What are the effects of hormonal transition?**

Effects of hormones in transition vary widely based on direction of transition, starting age, dosage, general health, previous hormone levels, exercise, body type, and genetics. In general, hormonal transition typically affects:

- Amount and pattern of hair on head and body
- Vocal deepening (in FTMs)
- Muscle and fat patterns
- Emotional patterns
- Libido
- Breast/chest tissues
- Menstruation ceases (in many FTMs)
- Changes in thought patterns
- Body odors
- Facial/head shape

<sup>3</sup> The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association Standards of Care are the most frequently followed by therapists and doctors. Transgender people have a variety of levels of agreement with these standards, but many who wish medical transition must follow them in order to access care. See [www.wpath.org/documents2/socv6.pdf](http://www.wpath.org/documents2/socv6.pdf)

## **What surgeries are available?**

### **For people transitioning from female:**

- Chest reconstruction (top surgery)
- Construction of phallus (bottom surgery)
- Removal of internal sex organs, such as hysterectomy and salpingo-oophorectomy

### **For people transitioning from male:**

- Breast construction/enhancement
- Genital removal and/or reconstruction
- Vocal-cord shaving to remove the Adam's apple
- Other surgeries to alter body shape

## **“What surgeries have you had? What does your [genital part] look like?”**

Privacy and modesty historically have been denied to transgender people and people with disabilities. Each person should get to decide how, when, and why to talk about their own bodies. Many transpeople feel that such a question should only be asked and answered when you would do so with a gender-typical person (such as with a sexual partner or urologist). However, some transgender educators will answer such questions if asked respectfully during an education session. If you do ask, please ask in a way that you might ask a typical person about genitals, and respect someone's decision not to answer.

## **How much does medical transition cost?**

The range varies widely depending on the type(s) of procedures people have. Many people travel to foreign countries, where the procedure(s) can be done for less money.

## **Does insurance cover medical transition?**

Some insurance companies are starting to cover some transitioning, but historically, medical transition has been considered elective or cosmetic.

## **Why doesn't every transgender person fully transition?**

Many factors influence transition decisions. For some, “full transition” may mean simply changing the name



one wishes to be called. Others who may wish for physical transition may want to change some body parts but not others. People who physically and/or socially transition encounter barriers such as health, money, or job discrimination, and these factors may delay or prevent some aspects of transition. *It is most respectful to consider a person “full” and not push someone to transition more so that other people can be more at ease with their appearance.*

### **How is legal paperwork changed?**

Different states have different laws regarding changing names and/or gender on official documents. There are many different documents, legal or otherwise, that people get changed: birth certificates, driver’s licenses, Social Security cards and records, passports, school papers, library cards, discount cards, etc. Legal document changes vary by state and type. Most states require at least a letter from the therapist or doctor overseeing the transition, some states require a letter stating genital reconstruction, and some states ban changes on some documents. Homeland security laws have made changing legal documents significantly more difficult.

*Never use names or genders on documents to determine how you will accept or treat someone.*

## **Social Aspects of Transgender Lives**

### **To whom are transgender people attracted? Are they gay or straight?**

Most of the time, attractions remain the same through transition, although some do change. Because most of our words for sexual attraction/identity are gender-specific, people whose sexual attraction remains the same through transition may change identity labels. Generally, a person who identified as gay or lesbian before transitioning may afterwards identify as straight or queer. A person who identified as straight before transitioning typically identifies as gay, lesbian, or queer post-transition. Bisexual persons typically continue to identify as bisexual. People identifying as cross-dressers typically identify their sexuality based on their assigned gender.

Some transgender people, particularly those who identify as genderqueer, may choose to identify their sexual attraction as queer or use descriptions like “I’m attracted to men, FTMs, and masculine women.” There are currently no better words for sexual orientation that refer to attraction to transgender people who do not identify as men or women.

### **So if a person was straight before transitioning, why don’t they just stay their previous gender?**

Sexual orientation (straight, bisexual, lesbian, etc.) refers to whom you are attracted. Gender identity refers to how you perceive yourself (man, transgender, cross-dresser, etc.). Self-perception and attraction are two different (but related) parts of experience and identity.

For example, if a female-bodied person is attracted to men but feels that he needs to transition, then he will most likely identify as a gay man after transitioning. He could have the ideal female physique, but if he is unable to relate to men as a female, then nothing of short of transitioning will help.

### **How do families and friends relate to transgender people?**

Some people’s families and friends (including parents, grandparents, and children) are very supportive. Most loved ones need time for their perceptions to transition too.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, many transgender people’s families have rejected them because they could not deal with the transition/identity. Many family members and friends go through a period of grief for expectations or may need time to process the new information. Most families and friends are more mixed—some are typically more supportive than others, and people may seek to be personally supportive while not accepting identity or presentation.

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<sup>4</sup> For stories of supportive families of transgender people, see: Mary Boenke, *Trans Forming Families: Real Stories of Transgendered Loved Ones*. Hardy, VA: Oak Knoll Press, 2003.

## **Aren't you turning your back on feminism? (To FTMs, Drag Kings, or Genderqueer people)**

For many transgender people, learning about feminism is a step in feeling liberated to transition. Many transgender people strengthen their commitment to feminism when they live the realities of how differently people are treated based on gender appearance. Some transgender people never were and never will be feminist. Just like all men, FTM-continuum people can be feminist in using their male privilege responsibly to end sexism rather than perpetuate it. Much of the violence and prejudice against transgender people is really another manifestation of sexism—if men and women were equal, gender variance would be less threatening.

## **Aren't you just mocking women? (to MTFs, cross-dressers, drag queens)**

Many people on the MTF spectrum speak of transition as honoring and valuing women and femininity. Seeking to be or to perform as a gender is different than seeking to mock a gender, which is not appropriate for people of any gender identity.

## **Transgender People in the Church**

### **How are transgender people treated at church?<sup>5</sup>**

Few congregations are prepared for members to transition or for transgender visitors. Many transgender people have been subject to rejection, condemnation, and ridicule in congregations. However, many transgender people would like to be involved in churches. For many transgender people, religion has been an important resource of support in their lives. Also, transitioning is a profoundly spiritual process that has renewed faith for many transgender people. Some churches have become fully inclusive of transgender people.

<sup>5</sup> Since ReconcilingWorks is a Lutheran organization, this refers specifically to Christian churches. However, it is similar for people in most religious communities.

## **If cross-dressers (or genderqueer people, drag performers) can be themselves through part-time cross-dressing, why cross-dress in church? Can't they just cross-dress at home?**

Some do that, but this question implies that there is a part of their lives that is not acceptable to God. God recognizes us, no matter how we are dressed, and it is very freeing to worship God with every aspect of our being. Isn't it wonderful that this congregation is a place where people who have been oppressed feel free to express all of who they are! Congratulations on making your congregation a welcoming place. Continue this welcome by treating people with the same respect with which you treated people before and by making this congregation a safe place to be genuine, and celebrate who God has made all of us to be.

## **Doesn't the Bible say that people shouldn't be transgender or cross-dress?**

There is only one verse in the whole Bible that directly refers to anything that sounds like cross-dressing or transgender identity<sup>6</sup>:

A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God.

**Deuteronomy 22:5 (NRSV)**

However, later in the same chapter it says: "You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together. You shall make tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover yourself" (22:11-12). Deuteronomy 22 continues, with instructions that a woman whose hymen is broken before marriage is to be stoned to death.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Biblical texts, see:

- Tanis, Justin. (2003). *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press.
- Tilsen, Jon-Jay (Rabbi). (2004). *A Message from Rabbi Tilsen Cross Dressing and Deuteronomy 22:5*. Congregation Beth-El Keser Israel. [www.beki.org/crossdress.html](http://www.beki.org/crossdress.html)

Most Bible scholars today recognize these verses are part of the Old Testament codes of purity for ancient Israel. We don't follow them today because they don't match with the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament freedom from rules that lead us away from *loving our neighbors*. Many Christians don't follow the verses in the New Testament restricting the religious and social roles for women for the same reasons, as they lead to inequality and mistreatment, which seems to be against loving our neighbors.

Many scripture passages are particularly helpful in freeing us from gender oppression:

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, *there is no longer male and female*; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (*emphasis added*).

**Galatians 3:25-29 (NRSV)**

Clothed in Christ, no longer ultimately tied to being male or female, in our baptismal call we can all work together against sexism and homophobia as we are also called to work against economic injustice, racism, and all other oppressions.

## **How can Lutherans deal with God's law in these ways?**

Like any reader of the Bible, we all must make interpretation decisions. Just by picking a version of the translated text, we are already making an interpretation decision. The many specific laws in the Bible may or may not be God's Law for us here today. Even the Bible has three versions of the Ten Commandments, so there must have been change over time and place to even this core set of God's Law.<sup>7</sup> However, Lutherans do believe that God's Law for us is important in living our daily lives, based on the center of the Law:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

**Leviticus 19:18 (NRSV)**

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

**Mark 12:28-31 (NRSV)<sup>8</sup>**

In interpreting how best to love our neighbor, we can ask that the Holy Spirit guide us, and follow the Gospel to decide about which laws to follow, as Martin Luther says:

All other laws are to be measured by faith and love. That is to say, all other laws are to be kept where their observance does not conflict with faith and love; but where they conflict with faith and love, they should be done away with entirely.<sup>9</sup>

While those who oppose transgender behavior may do so in the name of love, it is never loving to disrespect someone, oppress someone, or ban someone from attending worship. It is God alone who judges us. It is sin for us to judge those who identify in a way that promotes personal and relational health and healing. Identifying as transgender and transitioning can often lead to a fuller relationship with others and with God. We can ask God to forgive us for oppressing transgender people and be assured of God's forgiveness of us. We can also ask God to help us to love all of our neighbors, relying on God's grace through the Holy Spirit.

<sup>7</sup> See Exodus 20:2-17, Exodus 34:12-26, and Deuteronomy 5:6-21

<sup>8</sup> This center of the law of loving God and neighbor is also found in Matthew 22, Romans 13, Galatians 5, and James 2.

<sup>9</sup> Preface to the Old Testament of 1545