

LGBTQI2SNBA+

Sex, gender and sexual orientation:
Inclusion through vocabulary

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of sex, gender and sexual orientation diversity has evolved very rapidly, both in terms of the law and the vocabulary used to describe its many facets. The well-known acronym LGBT is gradually expanding and continues to be built. In that context, we felt it was important to develop this tool to inform and raise awareness among our members of these rapid changes.

As of December 2015 in Quebec, as in many other places in the world, it is no longer necessary to have undergone medical treatment of any kind (surgical or hormonal) in order to change one's gender marker on their birth certificate and related identifications such as health insurance card, driver's licence, etc. Furthermore, gender identity and expression were added to the list of grounds for discrimination under the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms in June 2016. Sexual orientation has been on the list since 1977. These recent legal steps forward must be taken into account by educational institutions to better include and support trans and non-binary people. We should note that a legal transition (official modification of the sex designation) can in no way be used as a prerequisite for a trans or non-binary individual to be entitled to recognition of and respect for their gender identity or expression.

The proliferation of new vocabulary to describe diversity related to sex, gender and sexual orientation highlights the progressive transition from a binary approach (man-woman, homo/heterosexual, etc.) to a more organic model that considers the multiple dimensions of the human experience.

This lexicon requires the understanding of these basic concepts:

Some of the words may be new, but the realities they describe are not.

For example, pansexual and non-binary people have always existed, but we only recently have acquired the words to refer to their realities.

Definitions still vary greatly from source to source. Everything presented in this document may therefore be subject to discussion and further clarification. We are not attempting to rule definitively on terminology but to paint a portrait that may be useful in our role as teachers and educators.

The vocabulary presented here is a vocabulary of self-identification. Indeed, only the person living the experience can choose the term that best describes it.

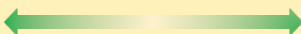
This process is therefore not designed to label individuals or to put them in a narrow, closed and unchanging box. We rather want to explore a vocabulary that reflects the experience of each and every person, words that are meaningful to them and show them they are not alone.

Five axis or continuums to better describe sex, gender and sexual orientation

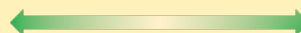
1. Sexual orientation

Heterosexual  Homosexual

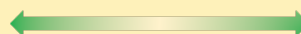
2. Romantic or affectional orientation

Directed at women  Directed at men

3. Gender identity

Man  Woman

4. Gender expression

Cultural stereotypes of masculinity  Cultural stereotypes of femininity

5. Sex characteristics

Female associated sex characteristics  Male associated sex characteristics

Note : Any attempt to develop a diagram of reality will always be simplistic thus an incomplete and imperfect model.

1. Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation has to do with the sexual attraction felt for men or women or for individuals who do not fall within this binary gender construct. This continuum ranges from **heterosexuality** to **homosexuality** and includes between those two poles **bisexuality** and **pansexuality**. It also includes **asexuality**.

2. Romantic or affectional orientation

Romantic or affectional orientation has to do with the romantic attraction felt for men or women or for individuals who do not fall within this binary gender construct. This axis can often be superimposed on that of sexual orientation, but not necessarily.

3. Gender identity

Gender identity refers to an individual's personal understanding of their gender, regardless of the box checked off by the physician on their birth certificate (sex assigned at birth); it is a profound and intimate feeling. For that reason, only the individual can affirm their identity (self-identification) and can, if they desire, engage in a process of transition that is appropriate for them. **Gender** is a self-identification continuum that is generally thought of as having two poles, one masculine and the other feminine, but every shade between or outside the two poles is also possible, personal and legitimate.

4. Gender expression

Gender expression is how our society characterizes our appearance, whether feminine or masculine (clothing, hair style, make-up, body language, etc.), regardless of the person's gender. The two poles of this axis correspond to the stereotypical representations of the feminine and the masculine as conveyed by our societies. In between the two poles are all possible gender expressions. **Gender expression** is not necessarily a manifestation of an individual's **gender identity** and one person may have various gender expressions.

5. Sex characteristics

This axis has to do with the continuum of biological traits associated with male and female. Whether we are referring to the internal and external genitalia, hormone levels, secondary sex characteristics or even chromosomes, the sex binary does not accurately capture the reality of diversity, notably by not including **intersex traits** and thus excluding **intersex people**.

BEYOND CONTINUUMS AND ACRONYMS ARE PEOPLE

The five axis are completely independent of one another and every individual can be found somewhere along each of the continuums.

All combinations are possible. For example:

- A lesbian trans woman
- A heterosexual cisgender man with a somewhat feminine gender expression
- A bisexual woman who prefers women in her love life
- A non-binary person attracted to men in their sex life and love life
- A pansexual cisgender woman with a somewhat masculine gender expression
- A heterosexual intersex man
- An asexual person in a romantic relationship with a heterosexual individual
- Etc.

How can we be more accepting and inclusive?

A number of things can be done to create a more accepting and inclusive environment. In particular, institutions can explicitly display openness to the LGBTQI2SNBA+ realities through awareness initiatives, inclusive policies, posters, etc. But basically, acceptance and inclusion must be conveyed first and foremost through listening to people, respecting their privacy and using the words they use to self-identify, i.e. their preferred given name and pronoun (female, male or neutral). It can also be achieved by treating them as you would anyone else and remembering above all that a trans, gay, non-binary or intersex person who comes to see you about managing exam-time stress at school may in fact just be coming to see you about managing exam-time stress at school...

GLOSSARY

We have elected to group related terms rather than list them in alphabetical order in order to build common threads. However, some terms obviously could fall into more than one category.

Terms related to sexual orientation

- A **homosexual** person (gay, lesbian) is sexually attracted to people of their own gender.
- A **heterosexual woman** is sexually attracted to men and a **heterosexual man** is sexually attracted to women.
- A **bisexual** person is sexually attracted to men and women.

Deep-rooted prejudice against bisexual people:

“Bisexuality has an impact on one’s ability to be faithful or live as a couple”: faithfulness, like every other convention related to being a couple, does not have a sexual orientation. A bisexual individual is no more disposed to be unfaithful than anyone else.

“Bisexuality is a phase or stage of homosexuality”: Although possible, bisexuality is also a sexual orientation. We note that heterosexuality can also be a stage of questioning about one’s sexual orientation, but contrary to bisexuality, the validity of heterosexuality is never questioned!

A **pansexual** person is sexually attracted to people regardless of their gender.

An **asexual** person rarely if ever feels sexual attraction. This is an umbrella term that includes various degrees of attraction. For example, some asexual people feel sexual desire only once they have established a strong emotional connection to a person, while others never feel it at all.

A **LGBT Family** is a family in which one or both parents are homosexual, bisexual or trans.

A **queer person** is someone who has chosen to use this term as a reflection of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. This once pejorative term has been reclaimed as a form of empowerment. Some queer people include a political element of rejection of social norms in their self-identification.

Two-spirited is a First Nations concept that conveys both an Aboriginal identity and an expression of sexual or gender diversity. However, every Aboriginal community has its own definition of two-spirited, particularly with respect to the spiritual dimension of the term. Two-spirited cannot be reduced to just the dimensions of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

Homophobia encompasses all negative attitudes that can lead to discrimination (harassment, rejection, violence, etc.) against an individual or group of individuals based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Homophobia includes lesbophobia, gayphobia and biphobia. Homophobia can affect anyone whose appearance or behaviour does not conform to gender stereotypes.

Heterosexism is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexual orientations. Heterosexism contributes to the denial of other sexual orientations.

Heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and that heterosexual relationships are the reference point for determining what is normal (valid) or not.

Words to avoid:

- Saying that someone is **openly homosexual**;

Would you say that a person is openly heterosexual when they talk about their spouse or partner? It is better to say that someone is “out” or has “come out.”

- Saying that someone **admits** that they are homosexual;

This is pejorative, because it implies admitting wrongdoing, faults or weaknesses, etc.

- Telling a homosexual individual: **“It doesn’t show...”**

Is this meant as a compliment? So is it preferable to be invisible? Or does it mean that the person’s gender expression conforms to social expectations and is thus more “acceptable”?

Terms related to gender identity and gender expression

Sex refers primarily to the anatomical nature of an individual's genitalia or reproductive organs.

Sex assigned at birth is determined by the physician, who checks off the M (male) or F (female) box on the birth certificate based on an observation of the baby's genitalia. The physician's decision becomes the person's legal **sex designation** on their birth certificate. Assigning a sex marker is mandatory in Quebec.

Sex designation is a legal term used to refer to a person's **gender** in a document based on what is indicated on their birth certificate. The designation may or may not correspond to the individual's **gender identity**. If it doesn't, it is possible to apply to the Direction de l'état civil to have the sex designation changed. In Quebec, sex designation is used to classify people as one of two genders, male or female. It does not take into account non-binary individuals.

Gender identity is an individual's personal understanding of their gender, regardless of what appears on their birth certificate (sex assigned at birth); it is a profound and intimate feeling. For that reason, only the individual can affirm their identity (self-identification) and, if they desire, engage in a process of transition that is appropriate for them.

Gender is a self-identification continuum that is generally thought of as having two poles, one masculine and the other feminine, but every shade between or outside the two poles is also possible, personal and legitimate.

Gender binarity stems from the male-female binary social construct that limits gender identity to just two sexes with which we associate masculine and feminine gender stereotypes.

Gender fluidity is a rupture of the notion of gender binary.

A **non-binary person's** gender identity falls outside the bounds of male-female binary. Such people often prefer to use gender-neutral pronouns such as they in reference to themselves. Non-binary is an umbrella term that refers among other things to people who self-identify as both male and female or as neither male nor female. This person may have an androgynous gender expression but not necessarily.

Trans is an umbrella term that includes every individual whose gender does not match their assigned sex at birth. The term may or may not encompass a non-binary individual, depending on how they self-identify.

A trans woman is a woman for whom the physician checked off M (male sex) on her birth certificate.

A trans man is a man for whom the physician checked off F (female sex) on his birth certificate.

Some trans individuals prefer the term **transsexual** and others prefer **transgender**. Historically, the two terms distinguished between people who felt a need to undergo surgical modification and those who did not. The dichotomy is now considered outdated and people may use either term or simply use trans, depending on their personal choice (self-identification).

Trans experiences are numerous. As an individual affirms their gender identity, they may engage in a process that involves **transitioning**:

- **socially**, i.e. by coming out to the people around them;
- **medically**, through surgery or hormone treatments;
- **legally**, by changing their name or sex designation with the Direction de l'état civil (no medical treatment required);
- Any combination of the three.

Transition is a personal journey that can be very different from one person to the next.

Transphobia encompasses all negative attitudes that can lead to discrimination (harassment, rejection, violence, etc.) against a trans individual or people who don't conform to stereotypes of masculinity or femininity. An example of transphobia is using the wrong given name or pronoun whether in front of the individual or not.

A cisgender person is an individual whose gender matches what the physician checked off at birth (sex assigned at birth).

Cisnormativity is the assumption that cisgender is the norm and that the gender binary should be the reference point for determining what is normal (valid) or not.

Cissexism is the assumption that everyone is cisgender. Cissexism contributes to a denial of other gender identities and to the idea that only male-female binary is valid.

Transidentity has to do with the gender identity of trans individuals. It is a term that is not unanimously agreed upon by trans communities, because it focuses on a hypothetical “trans identity” whereas trans individuals primarily self-identify with a particular gender, not with their transness as identity.

Gender dysphoria is a medical diagnosis of distress and dysfunctions experienced by some trans individuals with respect to their transition paths (family, work, etc.) and the transphobia they encounter. Not all trans people suffer from gender dysphoria. It should be noted that **gender identity disorder**, a diagnosis that used to be enforced on all trans individuals, was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) in 2013.

Saying to avoid:

When speaking of trans individuals, caution should be exercised when using certain expressions:

- **“Becoming a woman” or “becoming a man”**

For example, a trans woman may say that she always was a woman, but it took time for her to affirm it socially: to her, there is no “before and after” in terms of her self-identification. She therefore did not “become” a woman.

- **“Born in the wrong body”**

This sentiment is true for some trans people, but it should not be generalized to everyone. Medical transition (hormone treatments or surgery) is extremely important, sometimes vital, to some trans individuals, but others do not feel as though they were born in the wrong body and do not feel a need to undergo treatment, which is a very serious medical decision and may involve sterilization.

- **“Complete or partial transition”**

Using such terms focuses on the individual’s genitals. It is an intimate aspect of a person’s life that is no one’s business but theirs. The expression also implies a certain gradation of one’s gender validity based on a medical process.

Further clarification

Gender identity is not simply a refusal to conform to gender stereotypes. It is a profoundly intimate and personal sense of an aspect of one’s own identity. A cisgender woman who dresses in a suit and tie is not “becoming” a trans man, just as a trans woman who wears steel-toed boots and a plaid shirt is not any less a woman. These are examples of gender expression, which can change over time and is not necessarily tied to an individual’s gender identity. Gender expression is often the trigger to sexist, homophobic and transphobic behaviors.

It is indeed often the questioning of concepts of gender binary and gender stereotypes that provokes the most vehement or violent set backs or rejection, which underscores yet again the common roots of sexism, homophobia and transphobia. For example:

- a woman who attends a gala but does not comply with the expected dress code;
- a man whose body language is characterized as feminine;
- a non-binary person who asks people to use a neutral pronoun in reference to them.

Terms related to sex characteristics diversity

- **Intersex people** have a set of sex characteristics or **intersex traits** (chromosomes, gonads, hormones or genitalia) that do not match the binary medical definition of a male or female body. Such people are medicalized by the medical profession and are often subjected to interventions from a young age that are non-consensual, irreversible and not critical for health but are designed to make their bodies conform to the typical female or male model. They used to be called **hermaphrodites**. The term is now considered pejorative by many intersex people.
- An intersex baby is often subjected to repeated surgeries and hormone treatments designed to “normalize” their physical sex characteristics according to **heteronormative** and **cisnormative criteria**. For instance, for the medical profession to consider a vagina adequate, it must be able to be penetrated by a penis. Such interventions do not take into account the fact that the child may be in perfectly good health and that the treatments can have serious consequences, including infertility. Furthermore, the “normalization” is imposed without knowing the gender identity or the sexual orientation of the baby.

Clarifications regarding sex characteristics diversity

The very existence of intersex people (e.g. someone with a vagina and an internal testi, or a woman with XY sex chromosomes, etc.) confirms that sex is better represented as a continuum than a binary construct.

Non-consensual medical interventions imposed on intersex people have been associated with torture by the *United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Torture*.¹

As part of its *Free & Equal* awareness campaign, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights published an Intersex Fact Sheet. The following is an excerpt:

Physical integrity

It has become common practice to subject intersex children to unnecessary surgical and other procedures for the purpose of trying to make their appearance conform to binary sex stereotypes.

These often irreversible procedures can cause permanent infertility, pain, incontinence, loss of sexual sensation, and lifelong mental suffering, including depression. Regularly performed without the full, free and informed consent of the person concerned, who is frequently too young to be part of the decision-making, these procedures may violate their rights to physical integrity, to be free from torture and ill-treatment, and to live free from harmful practices.

*Such procedures are frequently justified on the basis of cultural and gender norms and discriminatory beliefs about intersex people and their integration into society.*²

CONCLUSION

Sex, gender and sexual orientation diversity have always existed in every civilization. However, as the Turkish poet Ilhan Berk eloquently said, “What has no name does not exist.” Words are tools and vectors for mutual understanding and respect.

Regardless of where one is on each of the major continuums of sex, gender and sexual orientation diversity, we are all human beings and we all deserve respect for our dignity and our fundamental human rights.

1 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session22/A.HRC.22.53_English.pdf
2 https://unfe.org/system/unfe-65-Intersex_Factsheet_ENGLISH.pdf

