

Language Guide

Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

Introduction

In support of our vision of a gender-equal world where all people achieve their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), EngenderHealth implements high-quality, gender-equitable programs that promote sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care for all people—regardless of gender, sex, or sexuality. All EngenderHealth language should similarly reflect this vision and our overarching **Principles of Language Use**—all EngenderHealth language related to adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health (AYSRH) should be (1) current as well as medically and technically **accurate**, (2) consciously **nonjudgmental** and **destigmatizing**, and (3) deliberately and explicitly **inclusive** of the diversity of our partners and impact populations.

Key Terms

The table below explains select, commonly used terms related to gender, sex, and sexuality.

Explanations of Common Terms*
Sex or sex assigned at birth : The classification of a person as <i>male</i> , <i>female</i> , or <i>intersex</i> , determined at birth, usually based on the appearance of their external anatomy but actually reflects a combination of characteristics including: chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics (the latter of which typically emerge at puberty). [sex]
Intersex : A person born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy and/or a chromosome pattern that cannot be classified as typically male or female. Also known as <i>third sex</i> in some cultures. [sex]
Gender : Social and cultural roles of each sex within a given society. Note : A person's <i>gender identity</i> and <i>gender expression</i> do not always align with each other or with their <i>sex</i> . [gender]
Gender expression : The ways in which a person manifests their gender—including by name, pronoun, clothing, hair style, behavior, voice, and/or body characteristics—which a society identifies as masculine or feminine. [gender]
Gender identity : A person's internal sense of their gender, which may or may not align with their sex, and which is not necessarily externally visible. [gender]
Cisgender : A person whose gender identity aligns with expectations of society for their sex assigned at birth; i.e., those who are not <i>transgender</i> . Also abbreviated as <i>cis</i> and also known as <i>gender normative</i> or <i>gender straight</i> . Note : May be used in combination with heterosexual as abbreviated <i>cis-het</i> . [gender]
Nonbinary : A person whose gender identity and/or expression falls outside the categories of male and female, (e.g., somewhere in between or as wholly different from those two terms). Abbreviated as <i>enby</i> or <i>NB</i> and also known as <i>genderqueer (GQ)</i> and as <i>third gender</i> in some cultures. [gender]
Transgender : A person whose gender identity and/or expression differs from their sex as assigned at birth. Abbreviated as <i>trans</i> . Note : While some trans people alter their bodies (e.g., via medical interventions, including but not limited to hormones and/or surgeries), a transgender identity is not dependent upon physical appearance. [gender]
Sexuality : Encompasses <i>sex</i> , <i>gender identities and expressions</i> , and <i>sexual orientation</i> , as well as eroticism, intimacy, pleasure, and reproduction as experienced and expressed in attitudes and beliefs, thoughts and values, behaviors and practices, desires and fantasies, and relationships and roles. [sexuality]
Sexual orientation : A person's enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person. For example, see <i>heterosexual</i> and <i>LGBTQ+</i> . [sexuality]
Heterosexual : A person whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to people of the opposite sex. Also known as <i>straight</i> and <i>hetero</i> . Note : May be used in combination with cisgender as abbreviated <i>cis-het</i> . [sexuality]
Gay : Describes a person whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex or gender. Lesbian : A woman whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women. [sexuality]
Queer : A person whose sexual orientation is not exclusively <i>heterosexual</i> . This includes individuals who perceive terms such as gay or bisexual as too limiting and/or fraught with certain cultural connotations and those who identify as both queer and another sexual orientation (e.g., <i>queer</i> and a <i>lesbian</i>). [sexuality]
LGBTQ+ : Abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer/questioning, and other (e.g., intersex, agender, asexual, pansexual, and ally). Note : There are other variants used but this is EngenderHealth's preferred term. [sex, gender, sexuality]

* Refer to the "Inclusive Terminology" appendix in the *Re:MIX Training of Facilitators Guide* for additional details and additional terms.

Core Principles

Our core principles related to gender, sex, and sexuality include the following:

- All people—regardless of gender, sex, or sexuality—have the right to make decisions about their own bodies and lives.
- All people—regardless gender, sex, or sexuality—should be treated with respect and dignity when accessing SRH care.
- All people—regardless of gender, sex, or sexuality—have the right to explore and engage in consensual, healthy, respectful sexual activity—for emotional, mental, social, physical pleasure, and reproduction.
- All persons—regardless of gender, sex, or sexuality—have the right to determine if, when, and with whom to have children.

Recommended Language

The table below provides examples of accurate, inclusive, unbiased language—as well as language to avoid.

✓ Say this...	✗ Not that!
Sexual orientation	Sexual preference [†]
LGBTQ+ (or subcategory thereof, see definitions)	Homosexual [†]
Intersex	Hermaphrodite [†]
All people deserve bias-free, comprehensive SRH care.	LGBTQ+ clients do not need contraceptive care.
People of all orientations engage in various types of sexual activity; all people who engage in sexual activity risk contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and deserve high-quality, respectful, nonjudgmental care.	Gays are more susceptible to STIs because they are promiscuous. or Only gays have anal sex and that is why they get STIs. or People who have gay sex or live alternative lifestyles are more likely to contract STIs.
All people have the right to decide if, when, and with whom to have children. And, all people who engage in sexual activity are responsible for their SRH, including contraception. or Contraception is the responsibility of both individuals engaged in sexual activity.	Women are responsible for contraception (accessing/using). or Men are the heads of household and make the money so they get to decide how many children their family has and/or what family planning methods their wives use.
All people have the right to consent or refuse to engage in sexual activity and no person should force another person to engage in sexual activity against their will.	Men cannot control their sexual needs. or Real men don't turn down sex. or Wives are obligated to have sex when their husbands want it. or Women who wear revealing clothes deserve to be sexually assaulted.
Discussing menstruation, pregnancy, abortion, and similar may seem embarrassing, but is critical to dispelling myths and misconceptions that prevent people from making healthy decisions.	Conversations about menstruation, pregnancy, abortion, and similar are gross and/or shameful; they are women's issues and shouldn't be discussed with or in front of men.
Every person should be able to express their sexuality in a way that is comfortable for them.	Men should be men. or Women should be feminine and pretty.

[†] These terms are especially derogatory and should be particularly avoided.

Additional Considerations for Inclusive Language

Consider when citing a person's or group's gender is necessary. In some cases, for instance, in direct communications and conversations, or when referencing a specific individual, identifying gender may be appropriate—e.g., “The Minister of Health introduced the new policy during her opening remarks.” However, when speaking in generalities, ascribing gender is often unnecessary and may result in unintentionally exclusionary statements. Refer to the tips below for select examples of suggested terms and phrases that may be used to avoid such exclusionary language.

- Employ gender-neutral terms like **caregiver(s)** or **parent(s)** to respect a diversity of family constructs instead of binary and heteronormative terms such as *mother(s)* and *father(s)*.
- Consider using similarly gender-inclusive language when referring to intimate relationships. For example, using **partner(s)** or **significant other(s)** rather than *husband(s)* and *wife/wives*, and *boyfriend(s)* and *girlfriend(s)* reflects acceptance for various relationship constructs. Similarly, while **marriage** is an important and valid term for many and not all marriages involve romance or sexual contact, consider using **romantic relationship(s)** or **sexual relationship(s)** instead of *or* in addition to marriage to include unmarried individuals of all sexual orientations and those who may be engaged in less traditional relationships.
- Avoid traditional, binary pronouns (*he/his* or *she/hers*) and awkward dual constructions (*he/she* or *his/hers*). Consider using the singular **they/their/them** as gender-neutral alternatives to avoid assuming gender of or assigning gender to an individual (unless referencing a specific person whose indicated their preferred pronouns).
- Similarly, consider using gender-inclusive terms such as **individual(s)**, **person/people**, **client(s)**, **patient(s)**, and **provider(s)** in lieu of gender-limited descriptors, including *man/men*, *boy(s)*, *woman/women*, and *girl(s)*.
- Further, beware that *phrases* that may seem inclusive, such as “*men, women, boys, and girls*” or “*women, adolescents, and LGBTQ+ populations*” may be viewed as excluding certain groups (in the former example) or be seen as othering (in the latter example). Enhance inclusivity by simply using **all people**; **everyone**; **people of all genders, and sexualities**; and similar constructions instead.

Please also refer to the **EngenderHealth Style Guide** for additional approaches to achieving gender neutrality with language.

Resources

- Agarwal, A., Armendariz, M., Carnagey, M., Colbert, A., DeAtley, J., Rauh, S., Roller, L., Shirsat, R., and Willig, E. 2019. *Re:MIX Training of Facilitators Guide*. Washington, DC: EngenderHealth.
- EngenderHealth. 2020. *Gender, Youth, and Social Inclusion Staff Training Manual*. Washington, DC: EngenderHealth.

Suggested citation: Agarwal, A. and Golwalkar, R. 2021. *EngenderHealth Language Guide for Gender, Sex, and Sexuality*. Washington, D.C.: EngenderHealth.