

“Transgender” or “Transsexual?” A Guide to the Most Common Gender Vocabulary

By Shuli Elisheva

In 2014, Facebook added [over 50 gender options](#) for users who aren't “men” or “women.” These include a variety of non-binary terms such as “bigender,” “agender,” and “gender fluid.” One could easily ask: Why so many genders? In a future article, we will take a look at the fascinating world of xenogenders and neopronouns, but in this article, we are focusing on a different question.

As a trans woman, I'm intrigued by Facebook's list of gender options because most of them are not unique genders; they're spelling variants and synonyms. For example, the list includes “trans female,” “trans* female,” “trans woman,” “trans* woman,” “transgender female,” “transgender woman,” “transsexual female,” “transsexual woman...” Why so many words for what would seem like the same thing?

What's the difference between transgender and transsexual?

Aren't female and woman just synonyms?

Isn't trans just a shorter version of transgender?

And what's with the asterisk in “trans* woman” and “trans* female?”

But before answering these questions. I'd like to offer an analogy to something that you and I can both relate to: *halacha* (Jewish law).

Analogy: Why Are There So Many Opinions in the Talmud?

Nowadays, when a question of Jewish law comes up, the answers are often easy to find. One looks in the *Shulchan Aruch* (16th century) or the *Mishna Berurah* (19th century), or one consults with modern *teshuvot* (rabbinic answers to questions) that probe the many opinions in rabbinic literature and identify the codified positions.

But it wasn't always so easy. A thousand years before the *Shulchan Aruch* was published, the Talmud brought together countless debates over the tiniest matters of Jewish law. One rabbi says this, another says that, and yet another says a third thing. A commentator says all three are correct, while another says they're all wrong. And of all

these myriad positions, one becomes canon: “The *chachamim* (wise ones) say, the law follows the position of Rabbi _____.”

It took us Jews over a thousand years of commentary and debate before texts like the *Shulchan Aruch* and *Mishna Berurah* selected and codified the specific opinions that have since become standard Jewish law. It’s like a funnel: numerous possibilities enter at the top, but only one emerges from the bottom. And it takes time for the funnel to sift.

Why Are There So Many Words for Trans Women?

In recent decades, trans people have similarly been debating how to understand and talk about our transness. We know that our experiences don’t match what’s printed in traditional science textbooks, but without codified explanations – without our own *Shulchan Aruch* – we are left to figure it all out on our own.

In the 1990s, when I was a kid, the terms “transsexual” and “sex change operation” were commonly used to describe the identities and medical treatment for people who change their sex. In other words, prior to having surgery, I would not be a woman – I would be a man who wanted to be a woman, and only as a result of my sex change operation would I eventually get my wish. I would become a transsexual.

In the early 2000s, the term “transsexual” gave way to “transgender” as mainstream discussions began to sharply distinguish between sex (male/female) and gender (man/woman). By this line of thinking, I have always been a woman, but I was never female: I was a male (sex) who identified as a woman (gender). I was transgender: someone whose sex and gender are misaligned. Thus, mainstream terms for the surgery shifted from “sex change operation” (focused on change) to “sex realignment surgery” or “sex reassignment surgery” (focused on alignment).

Over the past 10 years, terminology has continued to shift, as mainstream understandings of trans women have increasingly prioritized gender over sex. This separation of the concepts means a person can be a woman regardless of what genitals she has. This is why American trans women are no longer required to undergo surgery to be listed as female in government and medical records. The surgery is now commonly referred to as “gender affirmation surgery” or “gender confirmation surgery.” It’s about affirming/confirming the truth of our womanhood, rather than determining it.

Spellings have become fraught for similar reasons. Nouns like “transwoman” (one word) and “trans-woman” (hyphenated) suggest that I am neither a man nor a woman, but

rather something else. On the other hand, using “trans” as an adjective, as in “trans woman” (two words) and “woman of trans experience,” affirms that I’m a *woman* who happens to also be trans, just as I happen to be Jewish and American. Some people use an asterisk, as in “trans* woman,” drawing on computer programming conventions for indicating that “trans” can be short for both/either “transgender” and/or “transsexual.”

While some might find these last few paragraphs baffling, perhaps even angeringly so, they could have been written in the format and style of the Talmud. “This person says X, this other one says Y, a third one says Z, and a fourth says they’re all right, but for the sake of having a decision we follow position Z.” The reason we have so many words for trans women is not because of intellectual laziness, but precisely the opposite. It’s because, just as Jews have been doing for thousands of years with regard to Jewish law, trans people today are deeply probing and debating the truths of our bodies and experiences.

But we, trans people, do not yet have our *Shulchan Aruch*. We do not yet have a clear, codified compendium with standard principles for explaining our transness. Because, until recently, schools rarely taught kids about the complexity of sex and gender, most of us have had to figure this all out on our own as adults. And so, in 2014, Facebook offered a list of 50+ gender options which are really just a handful of genders, bulked up with dozens of alternate spellings. And perhaps not surprisingly, Facebook has since then reduced the options to only three: “man,” “woman,” and “other” (fill-in-the-blank).

There are, however, a great many genders in existence. In a future article, we may explore the ever-expanding world of non-binary genders, such as astralgender, demigender, and pangender. But for now, I want to leave you with a list of the most commonly used gender vocabulary and their mainstream definitions. While the concepts in this list are complex and not everyone defines them in exactly the same way, I hope that pondering their mainstream definitions will help you deepen your understanding of trans people and sharpen your ability to talk about us with greater nuance.

A Guide to the Most Commonly Used Gender Vocabulary

Sex - i.e. male and female, primarily about chromosomes and reproductive organs

Gender - i.e. man and woman, primarily about identity

Binary - the concept that there are only two sexes or only two genders

Non-binary - someone whose gender isn't exclusively man or woman

Intersex - someone whose sex isn't clearly male or female, due to natal variations in chromosomes and sex organs. For example, [as noted on the website of the Intersex Society of North America](#), "a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types—for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris [that resembles a penis], or lacking a vaginal opening, or a boy may be born with a notably small penis [that resembles a clitoris], or with a scrotum that is divided so that it has formed more like labia. Or a person may be born with mosaic genetics, so that some of her cells have XX chromosomes and some of them have XY." When intersex people are born, a decision is typically made by the doctors about whether to raise them as male or female.

AMAB - **Assigned Male At Birth** - someone whose original birth certificate said male

AFAB - **Assigned Female At Birth** - someone whose original birth certificate said female

Transgender woman - an AMAB woman (a woman whose birth certificate said male)

Cisgender woman - an AFAB woman (a woman whose birth certificate said female)

Transgender man - an AFAB man (a man whose birth certificate said female)

Cisgender man - an AMAB man (a man whose birth certificate said male)

Trans = transgender

Cis = cisgender

Gender identity - a synonym for gender, used interchangeably

Gender stereotypes - stereotypes about gender

Gender roles - social roles assigned to people based on their gender, for example men saying *kiddush* and women lighting Shabbat candles

Gender presentation - how someone expresses their gender, for example through clothing, cosmetics, mannerisms, pronouns, etc.

Gender non-conformity - when someone's gender presentation doesn't align with gender stereotypes. For example, a man who wears makeup is a gender non-conforming man. This is different from a transgender woman, who is not a man.

Misgender - when someone's gender is misidentified, for example when a woman with a deep voice is called "sir" over the phone

Gender dysphoria - physical and psychological distress when one is misgendered or anticipates being misgendered

Gender euphoria - physical and psychological relief when one is correctly gendered or anticipates being correctly gendered

Gender transition - the process of altering one's gender presentation to better match their gender identity. My transition didn't make me a woman; I have always been a woman. My transition is just a way of better aligning my body and gender presentation with my gender identity.

Social transition - social aspects of one's gender transition (for example, changing one's name and pronouns or wearing different clothing)

Medical transition - medical aspects of one's gender transition (for example, hormone replacement therapy and surgeries)

Hormone replacement therapy - taking medications to alter one's hormonal balance. For trans people, this can drastically alter our secondary sex characteristics, such as breast development, skin texture, facial structure, fat distribution, etc.

Top surgery - augmenting (for trans women) or diminishing (for trans men) the breasts

Bottom surgery - transforming one kind of genitals into another

TERF (Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminist) - a participant in a movement, primarily active in the United Kingdom, that generally opposes transgender rights but supports gay and lesbian rights. The author of *Harry Potter*, JK Rowling, is perhaps the most famous TERF. A synonym for TERF is "gender critical."

Egg - slang for a trans person who doesn't yet realize they're trans

"The moment my egg cracked" - the moment a trans person realized they're trans