



Frequently Asked Questions About Transgender

1. What Does "Transgender" Mean?

A "transgender" person is someone whose self-identity and/or expression violates or transgresses traditional notions of "male" and "female." Their gender identity and/or expression differs from their gender as assigned at birth.

2. Who Are Transgender People?

Transgender people include female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs or transsexual men), male-to-female transsexuals (MTFs or transsexual women), crossdressers (the term preferred to "transvestites"), drag queens and kings, and individuals who adopt a range of genderqueer identities and labels.

3. What Does Genderqueer Mean?

A relatively new term, "genderqueer" is used by many trans youth who do not identify as either male or female and who often seek to blur gender lines.

4. How Are Transsexuals Different from Crossdressers?

Transsexuals feel that their gender identity does not coincide with the gender they were assigned at birth. They may undergo hormone treatments and gender confirmation surgeries to align their anatomy with their core identity, but not all desire or can afford to do so. Although crossdressers wear clothes that are considered by society to be inappropriate for their gender, they do not want to change their birth gender and generally do not alter their bodies through hormones or surgeries.

5. What About Drag Kings and Queens?

Crossdressing was common among women and men who sought same-sex relationships in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and often thousands of people attended the annual drag balls held in cities like New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. While drag was a largely accepted practice in same-sex sexual communities, the opposite was true in the dominant, heterosexual society. Not surprisingly then, the first support groups for crossdressers consisted of heterosexual men, and some organizations even sought to exclude gay and bisexual men. Thus a clear split developed between drag queens and kings—lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who crossdressed—and heterosexual crossdressers. Beyond these separate histories, another difference between the two groups is that drag kings and queens are often very open about their crossdressing and may perform crossdressed. Crossdressers are rarely public about their crossdressing and may even hide it from their lovers or spouses.

6. Are Transgender People Gay?

Being transgender is about gender identity and expression, not sexuality—these are different, though not entirely unrelated, concepts. For example, transgender people are often perceived by society as lesbian or gay, and thus are discriminated against in similar ways.

7. How Are Transgender People Discriminated Against?

Like gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, transgender people face discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations and services. They are also potential targets for hate crimes and incidents: verbal harassment, threatening telephone calls and emails, and acts of violence committed by the same people who hate lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Trans people, though, are much more likely to fall victim to discrimination and hate crimes than non-transgender LGB individuals, because they often possess physical or behavioral characteristics that readily identify them as transgender. They are also often denied health care, including access to hormones and gender confirmation surgeries.

Adapted from Transgender Nation by Brett Genny Beemyn
Director, The Stonewall Center, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Gender and Sexuality Center
Student Services Building, Ground Floor