

Key Terms

The following is a list of terms that we use in our work and throughout the site. Some of the terms might be new to you, or we may be using them in a way that is a little different from other things you have read. Either way – if you are looking for a definition, you're in the right place!

Some of these definitions build from material in the following texts: “Are you Challenging Sexism and Male Supremacy?” (written by Paul Kivel), “Common Trans ‘Definitions’ and Terms” (compiled by Raphael Carter, Evan Hempel and Joelle Ruby Ryan, and edited by Jack Skelton), and Teaching for Diversity & Social Justice (edited by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell & Pat Griffin).

Accountability: Acceptance and responsibility for the impact of one's individual or collective behavior and actions. More specifically, to interrupt problematic behaviors, acknowledge the negative impact on a community and/or individuals, whether intended or not, and make appropriate reparations for harm caused.

Ally: To support another individual or group in undoing impacts and dynamics of oppression and domination. This term typically refers to a member of an advantaged social group taking action against injustice directed at targeted groups, and working to be an agent of social change rather than an agent of oppression. However, you can be an ally to anyone: to groups who are targeted in ways you are not, to groups who are privileged in ways you are not, to those who are part of the same social group – and to yourself. To ally is a practice, not a state of being. It requires collaboration, deep listening, openness to feedback, willingness to sit with emotions, and taking other people's experiences seriously. Being an ally means learning and practicing the skills necessary to intervene in statements, behaviors, policies and structures that harm, exploit or oppress others. Many have challenged the usefulness of this term in recent years, including the privilege that is often associated with being an ally. Some people prefer thinking about this as solidarity or collaboration instead.

Cisgender: A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth and were raised with. Cisgender people are accorded certain privileges by society that others do not receive.

Feminism: Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into.” – bell hooks, From Margin to Center.

Gender Binary: The gender binary is the classification of sex and gender into two distinct, opposite and disconnected forms of man and woman, or masculine and feminine. Male supremacy relies on the gender binary to legitimate the notion of the inherent superiority of men and boys over women and girls, and uses social and institutional (medical, legal, etc) power to punish and control bodies and behaviors that threaten this binary.

Gender Identity: A person's self-understanding or self-definition of their gender (e.g. trans man, cisgender woman, genderqueer, or infinite others), which may or may not correlate to what society or other people tell them their gender is or should be.

Gender Non-Conforming: A term often used by the myriad individuals who may not identify as transgender, but who do not conform to traditional gender norms. This term may include, but is not limited to, bigenders, gender benders, genderqueers, men, women, and transgender individuals; it may be used in tandem with other identities, such as queer or lesbian (sexual orientation terms).

Heteronormativity: A system of beliefs and practices which holds that people fall into natural, distinct and differentially valued roles. Man is positioned as the opposite (and superior) of woman, as is the existence of only two 'opposite' genders. Heterosexual sex and attraction is understood as normal, natural and universal. This system is systematized within social, religious, legal and other institutional contexts, as well as internalized by individuals. Anything outside of heterosexual norms is treated with suspicion and violence, thus reinforcing heterosexual privilege and the gender binary system.

Heteropatriarchy: Similar to "male supremacy", this term refers to a system that benefits cisgender men through exploiting and wielding violence against cisgender women, transgender and gender non-conforming people. In addition, this term emphasizes how sexual orientation is policed and LGBTQ people are oppressed within this broader system, as well as the assertion of male authority in the familial context. Men continuously gain power and privilege in patriarchy at the expense of women through maintaining various forms of domination over women and children through familial, religious, economic, political & social practices, systems and institutions.

Intersectionality: An understanding of the commonalities, intersections and mutually reinforcing structures of race, class, sexuality, gender, nation, age, ability and religion, especially as these aspects of identity manifest in systems and institutions. This complex understanding of how multiple forms of oppression come together and interact can help us to devise strategies for and approaches to political praxis that address and challenge oppression more effectively.

Liberatory (Collective Liberation): An approach or strategy that is mindful of the interlocking and interdependent nature of systems of oppression, and seeks to undo them. In other words, a liberatory approach works from an acute understanding of the intersectionality of power, privilege and oppression, with the aim of realizing collective liberation - the elimination of all forms of oppression and domination, and the creation of empowering and inclusive communities, institutions and systems.

Male Privilege: The power, prestige, advantages and benefits that are afforded to those people whose perceived gender is male/masculine. Like any systemic privilege, the flip side is oppression – namely, the exploitation, dehumanization and violence that targets and harms some people, based on their perceived gender as female/feminine. This privilege – and oppression – grow out of a system of male supremacy that is organized to privilege cisgender men (particularly those that experience other systemic privileges, e.g., race, class, age, ability, sexual orientation). The reality of male privilege does not imply that cisgender men do not experience violence and oppression – including in ways that reinforce the power, prestige and benefits of other cisgender men.

Male Supremacy: The pervasive, institutionalized, everyday system of exploitation, marginalization and violence that targets cisgender women and transgender/gender non-conforming people, and affords power, prestige and benefits to cisgender men, based on one's perceived gender identity.

Oppression (Systems of Oppression): Oppression refers to the systemic relations of power, control and exploitation - economic, social and psychological - between social groups and classes within societies. Oppression is characterized by the repeated and widespread abuse, violence and injustice of a dominant group toward a subordinate group. Oppression privileges and benefits members of a dominant group regardless of whether or not they are intentionally perpetuating oppressive conditions.

Sexism: The systematic subordination of women, by men, through a broad array of institutionalized and everyday systems of exploitation and violence.

Sexuality: The expression, contemplation or existence of attraction/sexual feelings toward other beings and/or oneself. How one defines one's sexuality, and what one finds attractive or desirable, is shaped by one's personal experience and gender identity, in addition to social and biological factors. Our sexualities emerge within the context of male supremacy, heteronormativity and the gender binary.

Transformative Justice: A framework and practice that seeks to address both specific incidents of violence and larger systems of injustice and oppression through seeking the following:

- safety, healing and agency for the survivor,
- accountability and transformation for the person who caused harm,
- community response and accountability, and
- transformation of the institutional and social conditions that create and perpetuate violence.

The final component is what most distinguishes it from restorative justice.

Transgender: A person whose gender identity differs from what is typically associated with the gender they were assigned at birth and/or the gender they were raised with. A transgender person does not necessarily identify as the 'opposite' gender within the male/female gender binary. At times, people write "trans*" to indicate its use as an umbrella term that includes many different categories of people whose genders do not conform to social norms and pressures.

Trauma (Psychological Trauma): Refers broadly to ongoing emotional, social, and/or physical experiences of pain and harm caused by either a singular, recurrent, or systematized series of events or abuse. Psychological trauma is often the result of an overwhelming experience or ongoing experiences that exceed one's ability to cope or integrate the emotions involved with that experience. Such experiences can be followed by acute stress and things like nightmares, flashbacks, extreme alertness or vigilance, increased startle response, moodiness, emotional numbing, dissociation and avoidance of other people and social interactions.