Introduction

When we advocate for sexual rights or discuss orientations and identities, the words we use to describe ourselves and others can be very powerful – and also confusing. This glossary of terms will serve as an introduction to the language used within the fields of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), and will help you to better the varied terminology.

However, this glossary is by no means exhaustive, and it is important to remember that the terms defined below are negotiable and ever-shifting, and may vary within LGBTQI communities around the globe. Regardless, every person has right to define their own identity, and we should respect the terminology we each choose to use to describe ourselves.

Asexual
An individual who largely does not experience sexual attraction towards anyone. Many asexual people experience attraction, but feel no need to act on that attraction sexually. Asexual people who experience attraction may be attracted to a particular gender, and can identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or straight. Some asexual individuals remain asexual throughout their lives; others describe it as ‘periods’ or ‘phases’. Not experiencing sexual attraction or choosing not to act upon such attraction should not be confused with romantic feelings. Many asexual people experience love and engage in relationships.

Bisexual
An individual who is sexually and romantically attracted to members of either sex – men and women. At different points in time, a bisexual person may feel equally attracted to both men and women, or prefer one gender to another. It is a common misconception that bisexuals desire more than one sexual partner at a time. An individual’s preference for number of partners is a function of one’s notions of monogamy and non-monogamy, rather than one’s bisexuality.

Crossdresser
An individual (regardless of the motivation) who wears clothes, makeup, etc. which do not conform to their ‘assigned gender’ or cultural ‘norms’ including social responsibilities.

Gay
An individual who has significant sexual and romantic attractions primarily to members of the same sex or who identifies as a member of the gay community. Sometimes refers only to gay men, sometimes to gay males and lesbians. Although some people use the term gay to refer to all sexual minorities (or the sexual minority community), it is not specifically inclusive of lesbians, bisexuals, trans identified persons and identities.

Gender expression
Gender expression is how an individual expresses their own gender to the world. Gender can be expressed in ways that include our names, how we dress, walk, speak, communicate, societal roles and our general behaviour.

Gender identity
Gender identity is an individual’s self-conception as being man or woman (or both or neither), as distinguished from their biological sex during and after birth.

Genderqueer
An individual who identifies as genderqueer may think of himself or herself as being both male and female, being neither male nor female, or falling completely outside the categories of male and female. Genderqueer people are united in their politics of rejecting the notion that there are only two binary genders. This may manifest in their appearance, social behaviour, physical features and characteristics. The term can also be used to refer to any people who transgress gender, though it is not synonymous with the term ‘transgender’.
**Queer**
A term used to describe persons, politics or academic theory that challenges social and cultural norms of gender and sexuality. This includes but is not limited to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and intersex people.

The word ‘queer’ was historically used in Anglophone cultures as a pejorative term to insult homosexuals, but has since been reclaimed by the gay movement. Its usage and meaning have since been expanded to the above description, “Queer theory” is a strand of sociological scholarship, mainly occupied with analyzing how norms of heterosexuality shape and affect queer identified communities and the society as a whole.

**Sexual Identity**
Sexual identity describes how individuals identify their own sexuality (usually based on sexual orientation). Sexual identity is not merely synonymous with sexual orientation or sexual preferences, but also describes how social or political influences cause people to identify (or not) with those labels. Sexual identity is separate and different from gender identity.

**Sexual Minority**
The term sexual minority is term used to describe a group whose sexual identity, orientation or practices are different from the majority of the surrounding society or status quo. The term is used by many international agencies and institutions to refer to LGBTQI people. The term is sometimes used in place of other language (such as LGBTQI, gay or lesbian, etc.) in international documents, declarations and programs, as it is non-specific and sometimes less contentious and more ‘politically correct’.

**Sexual Orientation**
Sexual orientation refers to the primary sexual attraction to persons of the same, other or both sexes. This includes being straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual. Some people express their sexual orientation as an individual choice, while others express it as having being born a certain way.

**Sexuality**
Sexuality denotes the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviours of individuals. Its dimensions include the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system; identity, orientation, roles and personality; and thoughts, feelings, and relationships. The expression of sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural, and moral concerns.

**Transsexual**
An individual who identifies with a physical sex different from the one with which they were born. Transsexuals may undergo sex reassignment therapy – hormone replacement therapy to modify secondary sexual characteristics and surgery to modify primary sexual characteristics to those of the sex they identify with. Additionally, transsexuals generally change their social gender roles, legal names and legal sex designation, where legally possible. This process is called transitioning.

**Transgender**
Transgender is the state of one’s gender identity (self-identification as male, female, both or neither) not matching one’s ‘assigned gender’ (identification by others as male or female based on physical/genetic sex). Individuals whose appearance and behavior do not conform to the cultural ‘norm’ for the gender into which they were born are considered transgender.

Transgender does not imply any specific form of sexual orientation, as sexual identity and gender identity are two unique and separate characteristics; transgender people may identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, etc.
**Heteronormativity**
Social norms that prescribe compulsory heterosexuality and culturally defined masculinity and femininity.

**Heterosexual**
A clinical term for straight people, denoting a person who is sexually and romantically exclusively attracted to persons of a sex other than their own.

**Hijra**
The term is used in the Indian subcontinent to refer to people who are neither men nor women and live in separate communities having distinct social structure and codes. Hijras are mostly intersex or biologically male, but some are female. Some may undergo an operation for total removal of male genitalia — the penis, testes and scrotum — and attain a higher social standing within their community. Usually, they refer to themselves in the feminine and dress as women.

**Homosexual**
This is the formal or clinical term for gay individuals. It implies someone who has sex with person(s) of the same sex as theirs. The term most often refers specifically to gay men, but sometimes also to gay men and lesbians, and occasionally to gay men, lesbians and bisexuals.

**Intersex**
A term used to describe a variety of conditions in which a person’s sex chromosomes, genitalia and/or secondary sex characteristics are determined to be neither exclusively ‘male’ nor ‘female’.

Traditionally, the medical protocol has called for the surgical reconstruction of these different but generally healthy bodies at childbirth or during early childhood to make them ‘normal’, i.e., either male or female. But this practice has become increasingly controversial, as adults who went through the treatment report being physically, emotionally, and sexually harmed by such procedures.

**Lesbian**
A lesbian is a woman who is romantically and sexually attracted only to other women, and self-identifies as such. Unlike the term gay, lesbian is not used to refer to all sexual minorities (or the sexual minority community).

**LGBTQI (also LGBTQ, LGBTQ, GLBTQ, etc.)**
Acronym used for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Intersex. Many variations of this acronym are used depending on the context, community and agenda.

**MSM**
MSM [Men who have Sex with Men] refers to any man who engages in sexual acts with another man. These men may also have sex with women and/or transwomen. Self-reported sexual identities (i.e., gay/homosexual, straight/heterosexual, bisexual) may differ from the sexual behaviours of this population. The concept of MSM is usually used as an epidemiological term related to HIV and AIDS, and is not recognized widely in LGBTQI communities.

**Pansexual**
A pansexual is a person who is sexually and romantically attracted to persons regardless of their gender identity or biological sex. Pansexual people negate the notion of two genders.
Transvestite
An individual who mainly cross dresses for pleasure in appearance and sensation. The pleasure may be empowering, rebellious, a source of comfort or erotic. In Latin America, the word travesti can be used to describe cross-dressers but also to describe transgender individuals.

Two-Spirit
The Two-spirit person is part of Aboriginal/Indigenous/First Nations traditions (in Canada and the U.S.) that believe in the existence of three genders: the male, the female and the male-female gender (now called the two-spirit person). The concept of two-spirit relates to today’s designation of gays, lesbians, and bisexual and transgender persons of First Nations/Aboriginal origins.

Conclusion
Remember that sexual and reproductive rights apply equally to all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Sexuality is a characteristic of every human being; it is expressed in diverse ways, but remains the right of everyone and must be respected regardless of social, cultural, and religious norms.

For more information or resources on SOGI issues, please check out these useful websites:

www.iglyo.com
www.ilga.org
www.iglhr.org
www.yogyakartaprinciples.org

References
1. From http://www.asexuality.org/home/overview.html
3. From http://www.intersexinitiative.org/