GENDER REVOLUTION
Redefining Gender
This glossary was prepared in consultation with Eli R. Green of the Center for Human Sexuality Studies at Pennsylvania’s Widener University and Luca Maurer of the Center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Education, Outreach, and Services at New York’s Ithaca College. They are co-authors of the book The Teaching Transgender Toolkit.

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To a degree unimaginable a decade ago, the intensely personal subject of gender identity has entered the public square. In this special issue of the magazine, we look at cultural, social, biological, and political aspects of gender. But first, we define our terms.

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Agender: Describes a person who does not identify as having a gender identity that can be categorized as man or woman or who identifies as not having a gender identity.

Androgynous: A combination of masculine and feminine traits or a nontraditional gender expression.

Cisgender (pronounced sis-gender): A term to describe a person whose gender identity matches the biological sex they were assigned at birth. (It is sometimes abbreviated as “cis.”)

Gender binary: The idea that gender is strictly an either-or option of male/man/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth, rather than a continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions. The gender binary is considered to be limiting and problematic for those who do not fit neatly into the either-or categories.

Gender conforming: A person whose gender expression is consistent with cultural norms expected for that gender. According to these norms, boys and men are or should be masculine, and girls and women are or should be feminine. Not all cisgender people are gender conforming, and not all transgender people are gender nonconforming. (For example, a transgender woman may have a very feminine gender expression.)

Gender dysphoria: The medical diagnosis for being transgender as defined by the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5). The inclusion of gender dysphoria as a diagnosis in DSM-5 is controversial in transgender communities because it implies that being transgender is a mental illness rather than a valid identity. But because a formal diagnosis is generally required in order to receive or provide treatment in the United States, it does enable access to medical care for some people who wouldn’t ordinarily be eligible to receive it.

Gender expression: A person’s outward gender presentation, usually comprising personal style, clothing, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, vocal inflection, and body language. Gender expression is typically categorized as masculine, feminine, or androgynous. All people express a gender. Gender expression can be congruent with a person’s gender identity, or not.
Genderfluid: Someone whose gender identity or expression shifts between man/masculine and woman/feminine or falls somewhere along this spectrum.

Gender identity: A person’s deep-seated, internal sense of who they are as a gendered being; the gender with which they identify themselves.

Gender marker: The designation (male, female, or another) that appears on a person’s official records, such as a birth certificate or driver’s license. The gender marker on a transgender person’s documents is their sex assigned at birth unless they legally change it, in parts of the world allowing that.

Gender nonconforming: A person whose gender expression is perceived as being inconsistent with cultural norms expected for that gender. Specifically, boys or men are not “masculine enough” or are feminine, while girls or women are not “feminine enough” or are masculine. Not all transgender people are gender nonconforming, and not all gender-nonconforming people identify as transgender. Cisgender people may also be gender nonconforming. Gender nonconformity is often inaccurately confused with sexual orientation.

Genderqueer: Someone whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders.

Intersex: An umbrella term that describes a person with a genetic, genital, reproductive, or hormonal configuration that does not fit typical binary notions of a male or female body. Intersex is frequently confused with transgender, but the two are completely distinct. A more familiar term, hermaphrodite, is considered outdated and offensive.

LGBTQ: An acronym used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning individuals and communities. LGBTQ is not a synonym for “nonheterosexual,” since that incorrectly implies that transgender is a sexual orientation. Variants include LGBT and LGBQ.

Nonbinary: A spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either-or option of male/man/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth. Terms include “agender,” “bi-gender,” “genderqueer,” “genderfluid,” and “pangender.”

Pronouns: Affirming pronouns are the most respectful and accurate pronouns for a person as defined by that person. It’s best to ask which pronouns a person uses. In addition to the familiar “he,” “she,” and “they,” newly created nongendered pronouns include “zie” and “per.”

Puberty suppression: A medical process that pauses the hormonal changes that activate puberty in young adolescents. The result is a purposeful delay of the development of secondary sexual characteristics (such as breast growth, testicular enlargement, facial hair, body fat redistribution, voice changes). Suppression allows more time to make decisions about hormonal interventions and can prevent the increased dysphoria that often accompanies puberty for transgender youth.

Queer: An umbrella term for a range of people who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender. It has been historically used as a slur; some have reclaimed it as affirming, while others still consider it derogatory.

Sexual orientation: A person’s feelings of attraction toward other people. A person may be attracted to people of the same sex, of the opposite sex, of both sexes, or without reference to sex or gender. Some people do not
experience sexual attraction and may identify as asexual. Sexual orientation is about attraction to other people (external), while gender identity is a deep-seated sense of self (internal).

**Transgender:** Sometimes abbreviated as “trans,” an adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity does not match the biological sex they were assigned at birth. It can refer to a range of identities including transgender boys and men, people who identify as a boy or man but were assigned female at birth, and transgender girls and women, people who identify as a girl or woman but were assigned male at birth.

**Transsexual:** This is an older term that has been used to refer to a transgender person who has had hormonal or surgical interventions to change their body to be more aligned with their gender identity than with the sex that they were assigned at birth. While still used as an identity label by some, “transgender” has generally become the term of choice.