

WORKING DEFINITIONS TO ASSIST THE CONVERSATION ON SEXUALITY.

GENDER: The concept of **gender** refers to qualities, traits, and activities collectively deemed to be masculine or feminine in any particular society. Although “things feminine” are associated with females and “things masculine” are associated with males, **sex and gender are quite distinct**.

The **content** of masculinity and femininity does not have an immediate biological foundation, despite the fact that gender **defines what it means to be a male or female in a social sense**.

Gender is a categorisation based not on physiological but on social attributes.

The social significance attached to being female or male and the use of gender as a component of social structures **varies between societies and over time**.

SEX – in reference to the categories “**male and female**”, is purely **physiological**. It refers to **biological attributes** which for the vast majority of the population can be simply ascertained by observing the nature of individuals’ reproductive sex characteristics.

Individuals may be born female or male but they have to **become masculine or feminine**.

Societies **socialise** their members into gender roles and expectations and they associate various **traits and qualities** with gender categories. The very fact that these roles, expectations, traits, and qualities vary from society to society and over time, indicates the real but often hidden disjunction between sex and gender.

SEXUALITY: The totality of being a sexual person, including feelings about being male or female, relationships, roles and sexual activity. Our way of being in the world as embodied selves, male and female. (Uniting Church of Australia Report on Sexuality, 9)

EROTIC ATTRACTION: What people find to be sexually arousing in a person (Uniting Church..., 9)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: The direction of a person’s erotic attraction. (Uniting Church..., 9).

Includes: 1. Arousal patterns, 2. Affective preferences, 3. Behaviour (patterns of physical contact with others.)

Of the 3 aspects of orientation, behaviour can be separated out insofar as it is voluntaristic. One cannot choose not to be aroused by or to “feel” drawn to others. Such an electric charge simply happens. One can however choose whether to nurture or repress how and when to act on these impulses and feelings. Recognising the distinction between orientation in its first 2 aspects and behaviour shape moral arguments.

SEXUAL IDENTITY: Consists of a number of components. Includes: Individuals **biological sex**, his/her **gender identification** (sense of being male or female), the persons **social sex role** (the cultural definition of being male or female), and the person's **sexual orientation**.

HETEROSEXUAL: A person who has an erotic attraction to and a preference for members of the opposite sex. (Uniting Church..., 9) The term is an abstract construction that derives its meaning in part from its contrast to homosexuality. A shorthand way to label certain aspects of human sexuality.

BISEXUAL: A person who has an erotic attraction to members of both sexes. (Uniting Church..., 9)

HOMOSEXUAL: A person who has an erotic attraction to and a preference for members of the same sex. (Uniting Church..., 9)

HETEROSEXISM: a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation. Denotes prejudice in favour of heterosexual people and connotes prejudice against bisexual and especially homosexual people. Heterosexism is not grounded primarily in emotional fears, hatreds, or other visceral responses to homosexuality. Instead it is rooted in a larger cognitive constellation of beliefs about human sexuality. Analogous to racism and sexism. ¹

HETEROCENTRISM: lies at the heart of this prejudice. Is the conviction that heterosexuality is *the* normative form of human sexuality. It is the measure by which all other sexual orientations are judged. All sexual authority, value, and power are centred in heterosexuality.

Heterocentrism has dictated both the content and structure of the debate in ways that make it impossible for us to see homosexuality as anything other than an aberration. ²

We need a variety of words to converse about our same-sex and different-sex attractions and behaviours. We need to find a way around the assumption of the normative character of heterosexuality. It is this premise that imprisons enquiry and thwarts open dialogue.

¹ Jung, Patricia Beattie. *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*. New York: State University of New York, 1993, 14.

² *Ibid.*, 14.