

## **Arabic LGBTQ Terminology**

### **A Guide for NIJC Interpreters and Staff**

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#### **Introduction**

This guide offers an overview of terminology relevant to conducting and interpreting intake interviews with Arabic-speaking LGBTQ asylum seekers. While much of the information presented here presumes competence in Arabic, the document still offers insight pertinent to non-Arabic-speaking staff working with Arabic-speaking clients. Accordingly, it is likely most helpful when read and discussed in advance of an intake by both the interpreter and the interviewer.

The contents of this guide are organized into four sections, each of which presents a list of terminology in English and Arabic followed by notes contextualizing many of the listed expressions. The first three sections list expressions appropriate for interpreters to use with clients, whereas the final section presents terms, often characterized as pejorative, that may be useful in understanding a client's lived experiences but are generally inappropriate for interpreters to use themselves. Where multiple Arabic expressions are offered as equivalents to the same English expression, interpreters are advised to select only one of the Arabic alternatives and use it consistently during an interview to facilitate comprehension.

Given that judgments about language use are always changing and open to contestation, the perspective offered by this guide should not be taken as timeless or objective; the information within these pages is intended solely to help inform terminological choices that should ultimately be made and (re)evaluated by the interpreter and interviewer in consultation with the client. Moreover, users of this guide should bear in mind that even those words deemed herein as suitable for usage by interpreters can be used in stigmatizing and dehumanizing ways; these terms should always be used in accordance with general ethical guidelines for interviewing and interpreting, such as those put forth in NIJC's "Volunteer Interpreter's Guide" and "Working with Interpreters" brief.

## Grammatical Gender in Arabic vs. English

Differences between Arabic and English as they relate to the meaning of specific terms are discussed across the notes sections of this document, yet one important contrast merits highlighting: unlike in English, numerous word classes in Arabic inflect for masculine or feminine grammatical gender. These include, for example, pronouns and verbs, which carry gendered markings in both the second and third persons. Non-Arabic-speaking interviewers should thus be aware that, to address or speak about another person in Arabic, an interpreter will generally have to assign the person a masculine or feminine grammatical gender. Interviewers may wish to inform interpreters, prior to an intake, of the grammatical gender appropriate to use when addressing a client, if known. If unknown, a phrase and strategy for soliciting a client's pronouns are elaborated under "Other Terms and Expressions" and in note 14. Similarly, if a person involved in the client's case, such as an NIJC staff member, uses gender-neutral pronouns in English, the interpreter would do well to check with the person as to which grammatical gender they would prefer the interpreter use to refer to them in Arabic.

## Authorship & Additional Resources

This document was prepared in spring 2021 by Keegan Terek, an NIJC intern and PhD candidate in linguistic anthropology at the time of its preparation. To select and describe the Arabic terminology presented within these pages, Keegan relied predominately on knowledge built through his own doctoral fieldwork with LGBTQ activists and refugees in Amman, Jordan. Many of the terms in this document can also be found, along with alternate expressions, in terminological guides published by prominent LGBTQ rights and humanitarian organizations operating in Arabic-speaking countries; these include, among others:

[\*Gender Dictionary\*](#), Lebanon Support.

[\*List of Terms and Translations\*](#), Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality.

[\*Masrad al-MusTaaliHaat\*](#), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

[\*Qaamuuqaws\*](#), alQaws for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society.

[\*Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression: Essential Terminology for the Humanitarian Sector\*](#), Organization for Refugee, Asylum and Migration

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## I. Identity Descriptors

These are terms appropriate for interpreters to use with clients, particularly when translating from English into Arabic. All terms below should bear grammatical gender markings consistent with the gender identity of the person they are used to describe. For example, a trans woman should be described using the grammatically feminine “*aabira al-jindar*,” not the grammatically masculine “*aabir al-jindar*.”

English	Transliterated Arabic	Arabic
lesbian <sup>1</sup>	<i>mithliyya</i>	مثلية
gay <sup>1</sup>	<i>mithliyy</i>	مثلي
bisexual <sup>2</sup>	<i>thunaa'iyy/a al-mayl al-jinsiyy</i> <i>muzdawij/a al-mayl al-jinsiyy</i>	ثنائي/ة الميل الجنسي مزدوج/ة الميل الجنسي
transgender <sup>3</sup>	<i>'aabir/a al-jindar</i> <i>'aabir/a al-naw' al-ijtimaa'iyy</i>	عابرة/ة الجندر عابرة/ة النوع الاجتماعي
trans <sup>3</sup>	<i>'aabir/a</i>	عابرة/ة
intersex <sup>2</sup>	<i>thuna'iyy/a al-jins</i>	ثنائي/ة الجنس
queer <sup>4</sup>	<i>kwiir</i> <i>kwiiriyy/a</i>	كوير كويري/ة
non-normative <sup>4</sup>	<i>la mi'yaariyy/a</i>	لا معياري/ة
non-binary <sup>5</sup>	<i>laa thunaa'iyy/a al-jindar</i> <i>laa thunaa'iyy/a al-naw' al-ijtima'iyy</i>	لا ثنائي/ة الجندر لا ثنائي/ة النوع الاجتماعي
heterosexual <sup>6</sup>	<i>ghayriyy/a al-jins</i> <i>mughaayir/a al-jins</i>	غيري/ة الجنس مغاير/ة الجنس
cisgender <sup>7</sup>	<i>mutawaafiq/a al-jins</i>	متوافق/ة الجنس
woman	<i>imra'a</i>	امرأة
man	<i>rajul</i>	رجل
female	<i>untha</i>	أنثى
male	<i>dhakar</i>	ذكر
feminine	<i>unthawiyy/a</i>	أنثوي/ة
masculine	<i>dhukuuriyy/a</i>	ذكوري/ة
LGBTQ community <sup>8</sup>	<i>mujtama' al-miim-'ayn</i> <i>mujtama' al-miim</i>	مجتمع الميم-عين مجتمع الميم

### Notes

1. Of all terms listed above, those for “gay” and “lesbian,” “*mithliyy*” and “*mithliyya*” respectively, are likely the most widely recognized among Arabic speakers. These terms may also be translated as “homosexual,” especially if, among other contextual factors, their scope is specified by the annexation of “*al-jins*” (i.e., if said or written as “*mithliyy/a al-jins*”); however, the much commented upon distinction between the connotations of “gay” and “homosexual” in English finds no obvious parallel in Arabic.

It is important to note that “*mithliyy*” and “*mithliyya*” may be used and understood by some speakers to denote a person who transgresses societal norms around gender and sexuality broadly construed; the more restricted sense of “gay” and “lesbian” as solely describing a person’s sexual orientation should not always be assumed of “*mithliyy*” and “*mithliyya*.” It is possible, for example, that a client may describe herself or report having been described as “*mithliyya*,” while at the same time presenting an understanding of self that an NIJC staff member would recognize as more consistent with the label of “transgender.”

2. Given that they both bear the adjective “*thunaa’iyy/a*” (“binary,” “dual”), the terms for “bisexual” and “intersex” may be particularly confusing to clients. It is likely helpful to offer a brief explanation when using either term for the first time with a client.
3. In recent years, the active participle “*aabir/a [al-jinda]*” (lit., “crosser [of gender]”) has supplanted “*mutaHawwil/a [al-jinda]*” (lit., “changer [of gender]”) as the preferred descriptor for trans people among many Arabic-speaking LGBTQ activists. However, the extent to which this terminological shift has become familiar to and adopted by Arabic speakers generally, including trans individuals, is unclear. Some trans Arabic speakers may therefore identify as “*mutaHawwil/a [al-jinda]*” and take no objection to this term’s usage.

In a similar vein, the usage of “*al-jinda*” or “*al-naw’ al-ijtima’iyy*” to denote “gender” within an expression equivalent to “transgender” may also not be practiced or understood by some. Instead, these individuals may use “*al-jins*,” as in “*aabir/a al-jins*” and “*mutaHawwil/a al-jins*.” While “*al-jins*” is commonly taken to mean “sex,” the expression “*aabir/a al-jins*” should not necessarily be construed as meaning “transsexual”—i.e., as carrying some additional meaning derived from a historically remarked-upon distinction between “transsexual” and “transgender.” Thus, if relevant to a case, information ostensibly inferable from a client’s self-identification as “*aabir/a al-jins*” (e.g., the client’s intention to surgically transition) should not be assumed unless confirmed explicitly with the client.

Finally, the borrowing of “*trans*” into Arabic is not uncommon, and some clients may prefer this expression over the aforementioned terms derived from Arabic roots.

4. As relatively recent lexical borrowings from English, “*kwiir*” and “*kwiiriyy/a*” are likely used and understood predominantly by Arabic speakers who are familiar with English-language LGBTQ discourse. Whereas “*kwiir*” inflects only for definiteness, “*kwiiriyy/a*” behaves as any other relative adjective in Arabic, inflecting for definiteness, number, gender, and case: compare “*al-nisaa’ al-kwiir*” and “*al-nisaa’ al-kwiiriyyaat*,” both of which mean “queer women.”

It is likely helpful for interpreters to translate “queer” as “*la mi’yaariyy/a*” (“non-normative”), when used by an interviewer as an umbrella term to describe non-normative gender/sexual identities and practices. Interviewers of Arabic-speaking clients can likewise facilitate the task of interpretation for interpreters by using “non-normative” rather than “queer” in any cases where they judge these words to be interchangeable.

5. As, for many speakers, Arabic lacks any intuitive paradigm for encoding a neutral alternative to its binary system of grammatical gender, even expressions denoting non-binary gender identity bear masculine or feminine gender inflection. If a client identifies as “*la thunaa’iyy/a al-janda*” (“non-binary”), the gender inflection of this expression should not be assumed to convey any information about the client’s gender identity (e.g., their “real” gender), unless explicitly indicated otherwise.
6. The active participle “*mughaayir/a*” (lit., “one who diverges from”) is used by some, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, within expressions meaning “transgender,” rather than “heterosexual.” It is likely helpful to offer a brief definition when using the term “*mughaayir al-jins*” for the first time with a client.

7. “*Mutawaafiq/a al-jins*” is probably among the least used and understood of the above identity descriptors. It is listed here more as a reference for interpreters in the event that the expression is used by a client than as a recommendation that interpreters use the expression themselves. If an interviewer were to use the term “cisgender,” the interpreter would likely need to elucidate the term in more words to facilitate the client’s comprehension—e.g., “*al-shakhS alladhi tatawaafiq huwiyyatuh al-jindariyyah ma’ al-jins alladhi asnad ilayh ‘ind al-wilaada*” (“a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex he was assigned at birth”).
8. “*Mujtama’ al-miim*” literally means “the community of [the Arabic letter] *miim*.” Its usage to denote the LGBTQ community is based on the fact that, at the time of the expression’s coinage, the preferred Arabic words corresponding to each letter of the LGBTQ acronym all began with letter *miim*. More recently, “*ayn*” was added to this expression, giving “*mujtama’ al-miim-‘ayn*,” in recognition of a shift among activists in the preferred descriptor for trans individuals from a word beginning with *miim* to a word beginning with the letter *ayn* (see note 3 above).

Some clients may not be familiar or identify with either of these expressions, especially if they did not interact with LGBTQ activists or communities in their country of origin. Thus, when used by an interviewer generically to denote any individuals who identify as LGBTQ, regardless of their involvement in LGBTQ activism or social circles, “LGBTQ community” may be more clearly translated using an expression other than “*mujtama’ al-miim-‘ayn*.” For example, if the interviewer asks how “the LGBTQ community” is treated in the client’s hometown, the interpreter might ask how “*al-ashkhaaS al-laa mi’yaariyyiin jinisiyyan*” (“sexually non-normative people”) are treated. This question might be most helpfully phrased by the interviewer, though, using the pluralized form of whatever label the client uses to self-identify; that is, if the client identifies as a lesbian, for example, asking how “lesbians” are treated in the client’s hometown poses less ambiguity for the interpreter to manage.

## II. Concepts of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

These are conceptual terms appropriate for interpreters to use with clients, particularly when translating from English into Arabic. Given their abstract nature and relatively limited usage in everyday life, many of these terms may need to be explained to be used effectively with clients.

English	Transliterated Arabic	Arabic
sex [that was assigned to you at birth] <sup>9</sup>	<i>al-jins</i> [ <i>alladhi asnad ilayk/i 'ind al-wilaada</i> ]	الجنس [الذي أسند إليك عند الولادة]
gender <sup>9</sup>	<i>al-jindar</i> <i>al-naw' al-ijtima'iyy</i>	الجنس النوع الاجتماعي
gender identity	<i>al-huwiyya al-jindariyya</i>	الهوية الجندرية
sexuality <sup>10</sup>	<i>al-jinsaaniyya</i>	الجنسانية
sexual orientation	<i>al-mayl al-jinsiyy</i> <i>al-tawajjuh al-jinsiyy</i>	الميل الجنسي التوجه الجنسي
homosexuality <sup>11</sup>	<i>al-mithliyya al-jinsiyya</i>	المتلية الجنسية
heterosexuality <sup>12</sup>	<i>ghayriyyat al-jins</i> <i>al-mughaayira al-jinsiyya</i>	غيرية الجنس المغايرة الجنسية

### Notes

9. Though historically used—like its Greek and Latin cognates, “genos” and “genus”—to describe difference on various grounds, “*al-jins*” is commonly understood by Arabic speakers today as corresponding to a naturalized binary distinction between males and females, similar to “sex.” Arabic terms corresponding with “gender,” meanwhile, are probably less widely known. Accordingly, the distinction commonly made between “sex,” as a biological trait, and “gender,” as a sociocultural construct, should not be taken as obviously implied by a speaker’s usage of “*al-jins*,” “*al-jindar*,” or “*al-naw' al-ijtima'iyy*.” If a client is unfamiliar with the above Arabic expressions for “gender,” and if distinguishing between “sex” and “gender” is not important to understanding the client’s case, an interpreter may find it most effective to translate “gender” as “*al-jins*.” See note 3 for guidance on the sex/gender distinction as it relates to terms for “transgender.”
10. Usage of “*al-jinsaaniyya*” is restricted largely to scholarly writing and translations, rendering the term unfamiliar to many. This term is also used by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to mean “gender” rather than “sexuality,” though such usage seems idiosyncratic. Interviewers may facilitate the process of interpretation by substituting for “sexuality,” when possible, expressions such as “sexual practices” and “sexual relations,” which bear more recognizable Arabic equivalents (“*al-mumaarasaat al-jinsiyya*” and “*al-'alaaqaat al-jinsiyya*,” respectively).
11. As mentioned in note 1, “*al-mithliyya al-jinsiyya*” may be used or understood by some Arabic speakers to refer to non-normative sexual/gender practices broadly, rather than attraction between people of the same sex or gender specifically. This latter, more specific sense of the term may be less ambiguously communicated through a phrasing such as “*al-'alaaqaat al-jinsiyya bayn al-askhaaS min nafs al-jins*” (“sexual relations between people of the same sex”), in line with the suggestion put forth in note 10.
12. Terms for “heterosexuality,” given its culturally unmarked status, are probably less familiar to Arabic speakers than those for “homosexuality.” Parallel to the suggestion

made in note 11, “heterosexuality” may be more effectively translated as “*al-‘alaaqaat al-jinsiyya bayn al-rajul wa-l-mar’a*” (“sexual relations between men and women”).

### III. Other Terms and Expressions

These are additional terms and expression appropriate for interpreters to use with clients. They are written in an artificial register of Arabic, adopting features of both Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic varieties, to facilitate their translation into the Arabic variety preferred by the client and the interpreter.

English	Transliterated Arabic	Arabic
What would you like me to call you? Is there a name you prefer I use rather than the one written on your ID? <sup>13</sup>	<i>kayf tuHibb/i akhaaTibak/ik? fi ism tufaDDil/i astakhdimu badal al-ism al-maktuub 'alaa huwiyyatak/ik?</i>	كيف تحب/ي احاطبك؟ في اسم تفضل/ي استخدمه بدل الاسم المكتوب على هويتك؟
What are the pronouns you prefer I use to address you? “You [masculine]” or “you [feminine]” or another pronoun? <sup>14</sup>	<i>maa al-Damaa'ir allati tufaDDil/i astakhdimha li- mukhaaTabatak/ik? “anta” aw “anti” aw Damiir aakhar?</i>	ما الضمائر التي تفضل/ي استخدمها لمخاطبتك؟ “أنت” أو “أنتِ” أو ضمير آخر؟
Is your attraction toward [men and/or women]? <sup>15</sup>	<i>injidhaabak/ik tujaah [al- rijaal wa/aw al-nisaa']</i>	انجذابك تجاه [الرجال و/أو النساء]؟
partner	<i>shariik/a</i>	شريكة/ة
living with HIV/AIDS	<i>muta'aayish/a ma' fayruus naqS al-manaa'a al- bashariyya /al-aydz</i>	متعايش/ة مع فيروس نقص المناعة البشرية/الإيدز
transition surgeries <sup>16</sup>	<i>'amaliyaat al-'ubuur</i>	عمليات العبور

#### Notes

13. Checking if a client prefers a name other than their legal name—and if so, using that name—can signal a respectful stance on the part of the interviewer and help to affirm the dignity of the client’s identity and lived experiences. While particularly important when working with trans clients, this question can also carry special relevance when working with Arabic-speaking parents, who may prefer to be addressed as “*abu/umm* [child’s name]” (“father/mother of [child’s name]”).
14. The practice of stating one’s own pronouns and soliciting those of another person is uncommon among Arabic speakers generally and likely familiar only to those exposed to certain LGBTQ activist discourses. Without giving specific examples of pronouns, the question may not even be understood by some. The practice is further complicated by the aforementioned fact that both Arabic third-person and second-person singular pronouns (i.e., words for “he,” “she,” and “you”) inflect for gender; it can feel cumbersome, or even impossible, to solicit an addressee’s pronouns without gendering the addressee in the process. If the interpreter and interviewer wish to avoid such gendering of the client, the most reasonable workaround may simply be to ask the client what their pronouns are two times in succession—once using masculine grammatical forms and once using feminine ones.
15. For clients who are unfamiliar with Arabic identity descriptors for sexual orientation or who prefer not to adopt them, this question offers a helpful circumlocution.
16. “*Al-'ubuur*,” used here to mean “transition,” shares the same lexical root as “*'aabir/a*”—the emerging preferred term for “trans” among many Arabic-speaking LGBTQ activists



(see note 3). If a client does not understand “*amaliyaat al-‘ubuur*,” the following expressions may prove helpful alternatives: “*amaliyaat ta’kiid al-jins*” (“sex [or gender] confirmation surgeries”), “*amaliyaat al-taHawwul al-jinsiyy*” (“sexual change surgeries”), and “*amaliyaat taghyir al-jins*” (“sex change surgeries”). The latter two of these expressions are likely the most used in mainstream news media and public discourse to refer to transition surgeries, including in ways that disparage trans people; interpreters should be sensitive to this context when considering using these expressions with clients.

## IV. Colloquial and Pejorative Expressions

These are expressions that clients may use, especially when describing past persecution or maltreatment committed against them by others. Their usage by interpreters is not advised unless otherwise noted below.

English	Transliterated Arabic	Arabic
[sexual] deviant <sup>17</sup>	<i>shadhdh/a [jinsiyyan]</i>	شاذة/ [جنسيا]
[sexual] deviance <sup>17</sup>	<i>al-shudhuudh [al-jinsiyy]</i>	الشذوذ [الجنسي]
sodomite <sup>18</sup>	<i>luuTiyy</i>	لوطي
sodomy <sup>18</sup>	<i>al-liwaaT</i>	اللواط
sapphist <sup>18</sup>	<i>suHaaqiyya</i>	سحاقية
sapphism <sup>18</sup>	<i>al-suHaaq</i>	السحاق
effeminate male <sup>19</sup>	<i>mukhannath</i>	مخنث
	<i>khaniith</i>	خنيث
	<i>khunthaa</i>	خنثى
	<i>mista'nith</i>	مستأنث
	<i>khawwal</i> (Egypt)	خول (مصر)
	<i>TanT</i> (Levant)	طنط (بلاد الشام)
	<i>manyak</i> (Levant)	منيك (بلاد الشام)
	<i>banuuti</i> (Levant)	بنوتي (بلاد الشام)
	<i>jiru</i> (Iraq)	جرو (العراق)
	<i>farikh</i> (Iraq)	فرخ (العراق)
	<i>zanaana</i> (Iraq)	زنانة (العراق)
<i>zaamil</i> (Morocco)	زامل (المغرب)	
man who has sex with boys <sup>20</sup>	<i>taba' awlād</i> (Levant) <i>qarrām</i> (Iraq) <i>abu al-walad</i> (Iraq) <i>bizranji</i> (Saudi Arabia)	تبع اولاد (بلاد الشام) قرام (العراق) أبو الولد (العراق) بزرنجي (السعودية)
masculine female <sup>21</sup>	<i>Hasan Sabi</i> <i>boya</i> <i>mistarjila</i>	حسن صبي بوية مسترجلة
shemale	<i>shii mayl/a</i> <i>shmayl/a</i>	شيميل/ة شميل/ة
transgender <sup>22</sup>	<i>mutaHawwil/a</i>	متحول/ة
man with a woman's appearance	<i>mutashabbih bi-l-nisaa'</i>	متشبه بالنساء
the third sex	<i>al-jins al-thaalith</i>	الجنس الثالث
top (sexual role)	<i>muujab</i>	موجب
bottom (sexual role)	<i>saalib</i>	سالب
gay <sup>23</sup>	<i>gay</i>	جاي جي

## Notes

17. Though sometimes translated as “homosexual,” “*shadhdh/a*” and “*al-shudhuudh*” have been used frequently in Arabic-language news media discourse to refer, respectively, to people and practices that transgress societal norms around gender and sexuality broadly construed.
18. “*Al-liwat*” and “*luuTiyy*,” derived from the name of the prophet Lot, are commonly used in discourse claiming religious authority alongside “*al-suHaaq*” and “*suHaqiyya*,” which bear a folk etymology locating their root in the Arabic word for “to rub.”
19. The meanings of the numerous colloquial terms translated here as “effeminate man” exceed any one English translation. These terms appear grouped together because they are all generally used to emasculate people who are perceived as failing to perform their expected roles as men. If a term is often used within or attributed to a particular country or region, its geographic correspondence is indicated in parentheses; the terms should not, however, be understood as shibboleths for the geographic origin of their users.
20. These terms, listed with their rough geographic correspondence (see note 19), are used to describe a man who engages in sexual practices with boys and effeminate men. Unlike those expressions translated as “effeminate man,” these terms do not necessarily emasculate the man they are used to describe.
21. For some speakers, “*Hasan Sabi*” may be more endearing than derogatory, somewhat akin to “tomboy.” Like “*boya*,” it is most often used to describe girls and adolescent women, rather than older women.
22. As elaborated in note 3, usage of “*aabir/a*” to mean “trans” has led to the pejoration of “*mutaHawwil/a*” for some speakers, though certain trans clients may nonetheless use the latter term to self-identify. “*MutaHawwil/a*” may also be used to disparage cisgender gay men and lesbian women.
23. An Arabic-speaking client may identify as “*gay*,” in which case it would not necessarily be inappropriate for an interviewer and interpreter to use this term. However, the term might be understood by some as denoting a sexually passive man specifically, and, as [documented](#) by Human Rights Watch, it has been used to label and commit violence against LGBTQ people. When written, the term’s first letter—specified above as the Arabic letter *jiim*—may vary according to how a voiced velar plosive (i.e., “hard *g*”) is generally transcribed among speakers of different Arabic dialects; for example, the Arabic letters *qaaf* or *ghayn* may be used instead.

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