**Important social justice words (and what they actually mean)**

When young people get involved in making change, we can come across lots of new words! Here is a glossary of words you might hear in activism, advocacy and youth spaces.

***Note:*** *This is a glossary, not a text book. The definitions here are just to get you started with understanding some big ideas. It’s always good to also do your own research and talk to people you know.*

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## **A-B**

### **Ableism**

Ableism is discrimination against disabled people.

**Example:** "Ableism can be explicit or subtle."  
**See also:** disability, discrimination

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People**

‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Torres Strait Islander’ are words that describe different groups of peoples. ‘Aboriginal’ refers to the original peoples of mainland Australia. ‘Torres Strait Islander’ refers to the original peoples of the 274 islands located north of Australia, in the Torres Strait.

**Example:** “We extend our respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the room.”  
**See also:** First People/First Nations, Indigenous, Traditional Custodians  
**Sources:** [Common Ground](https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/aboriginal-or-indigenous) and [the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)](https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/indigenous-australians-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people)

### **Accessibility**

Accessibility describes how easy it is to access something. It is usually used in the context of disability.

**Example:** “Online meetings increase accessibility for disabled and regional young people.”  
**See also:** disability

### **Activism**

Activism is campaigning to make large scale change happen.

**Example**: “We need activism to stop climate change.”   
**See also:** advocacy, campaign

### **Advocacy**

Advocacy is the process of making change happen. This can be change for yourself or your needs, for someone else, or on a larger scale.

**Example:** “I advocate for myself by telling my doctor what I need.”  
**See also:** activism

### **AFAB**

AFAB is short for Assigned/Assumed Female At Birth. This is often used in statistics and discussions around gender. Avoid using this term for other people without permission, as it reduces experiences to a gender someone else decided for them.

**See also:** AMAB, gender

### **Allyship**

Allyship is when you aren’t part of a certain group, but you still take ongoing action to support them. An important part of allyship is following the lead of people with lived experience.

**Example:** “My racial allyship is based on what people of colour actually need me to do.”

### **AMAB**

AMAB is short for Assigned/Assumed Male At Birth. This is often used in statistics and discussions around gender. Avoid using this term for other people without permission, as it reduces experiences to a gender someone else decided for them.

**See also:** AFAB, gender

### **Bias**

Bias is how your personal experiences and opinions impact how you think and act. We all have biases, and they can be both good and bad.

**Example:** “I’ve never experienced ableism. That is a bias that makes it hard for me to understand by myself what ableism is like.”

### **Binary**

A binary is when there are only two options - like black/white, yes/no, good/bad – that don’t leave room for ‘things in between’. It is often used in the context of the gender binary: when male/female are considered the only two gender options.

**Example:** “The gender binary is boring and harmful because it says ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are the only genders.”  
**See also:** non-binary

### **BIPOC**

‘BIPOC’ stands for ‘Black, Indigenous and People Of Colour’. It is commonly used in the USA, and some people in Australia feel like it’s not relevant to the context here. Where possible, it’s best to ask people what language they want you to use.

**See also:** CALD, multicultural, person of colour

## **C-E**

### **CALD**

‘CALD’ stands for ‘Culturally And Linguistically Diverse’. It is used to refer to people who have different cultures and languages to Anglo Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Where appropriate, it’s best to ask people how they want to be referred to.

**See also:** BIPOC, multicultural, person of colour

### **Campaign**

A campaign is a planned set of actions to achieve a goal.

**Example:** “Let’s meet up after school to prepare a campaign for making pronoun badges part of the school uniform.”

### **Cisgender (cis)**

Cisgender describes someone whose gender identity is the same as their assigned/assumed gender at birth. This often shortened to ‘cis’.

**Example:** “Cis people need to do better at listening to trans experiences.”   
**See also:** AFAB, AMAB, gender, transgender

### **Codesign**

Codesign is when an organisation works together on a project with a group that will be impacted by that project.

**Example:** “Young people codesigned this website for information about career options after school.”  
**See also:** lived experience, youth participation

### **Colonisation**

Colonisation is when a group of people invade land that is not theirs, and then continue violence and suppression to stay in charge. It is not one event, it is an ongoing process.

**Example:** “Britain colonised this land and called it Australia. Because of this, Aboriginal people continue to suffer racism in violent ways.”  
**See also:** Country/Land, Traditional Custodians, sovereignty  
**Source:** [Rona Glynn-McDonald for Common Ground](https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/australia-day)

### **Consent**

Consent is when you tell someone that you want to do something. You can properly consent to something when you have all the information about it, and no one forced you. You are allowed to change your mind at any point.

**Example:** “I consented to getting the vaccine after my doctor explained all the benefits and risks to me.”

### **Country/Land**

Country and Land includes everything in the landscape, like waterways, air, animals or plants. It can also include cultural aspects like songs or stories. Aboriginal people care for their Country and others should too as a sign of respect.

**Example:** “An Acknowledgement of Country is a way to pay respects to Aboriginal people and their land.”  
**See also:** Aboriginal People & Torres Strait Islander People, First People/First Nations, Indigenous, Traditional Custodians  
**Source:** [Victorian Public Sector Commission Cultural Capability Toolkit](https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/html-resources/aboriginal-cultural-capability-toolkit/glossary-of-terms/)

### **Cultural appropriation**

Cultural appropriation is when you use something sacred from another culture. It is offensive because it's like stealing something important that isn't yours.

**Example:** “The yidaki (didjeridu) has got to be one of the most [culturally] appropriated items of First Nations heritage and culture… Busking white women and men commercialising and making careers out of playing this instrument.”\*  
**See also:** racism, colonisation  
**\*Source:** [Angelina Hurley for The Conversation](https://theconversation.com/indigenous-cultural-appropriation-what-not-to-do-86679)

### **Cultural safety**

Cultural safety is when a service or space is set up to fit the cultural values and norms of the people using them. This is especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It means they can feel safe and respected.

**Example:** “Having an Aboriginal youth worker working with an Aboriginal young person increases their cultural safety.”  
**Source:** [the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)](https://www.vaccho.org.au/educational/cs/)

### **Disability**

Disabilities can be around any part of you, like your body (e.g. being blind or vision impaired) or your brain (e.g. having autism). Disability is not just about the person, but also the barriers they might face from society and how they access the world. Disability impacts everyone differently.

**Example:** “My disability is something I am proud of.”  
**See also:** ableism, accessibility

### **Discrimination**

Discrimination is treating someone unfairly because of something about them that they can’t change. It is often based on things like race, culture, gender, queerness, disability, age or wealth.

**Example:** “Discrimination can make you feel scared.”  
**See also:** oppression, privilege

### **Equality/equal**

Equality (or being equal) is when everyone gets the same amounts and types of resources, no matter what they already have. This means people might have different results.

**Example:** “My grandma gave everyone an equal size slice of cake, even though my cousins had already had two slices and I had none.”  
**See also:** equity

### **Equity/equitable**

Equity (or being equitable) is when everyone gets different amounts and types of resources. It depends on what they already have, and what they need. This is done to help everyone achieve the same results.

**Example:** “Our teacher is equitable because she gives extra help to Remi, who is the only student who can’t go to after school tutoring.”  
**See also:** equality

## **F-I**

### **Feminism**

Feminism is a movement to end patriarchy and sexism. It was originally about the rights of women. But now it is expanding to be more about rights for all genders. ‘Intersectional feminism’ is when we consider how all different aspects of a person impact their experience of gender.

**Example:** “Trans people’s rights are a feminist issue. This is because rigid gender roles are more dangerous for them.”  
**See also:** intersectionality, patriarchy, white feminism

### **First Peoples/First Nations**

First Peoples is a name that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first peoples of Australia. First Nations recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as being the true custodians/owners of the land. This values their nations, instead of the Australian states and territories. These terms can be used outside of Australia too.

**Example:** “I am not an Aboriginal, or indeed Indigenous, I am ... [a] First Nation’s person. A sovereign person from this country.” - Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, Anmatyerr woman from Central Australia.\*  
**See also:** Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islander People, Indigenous, Traditional Custodians  
**\*Source:** [Common Ground](https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/aboriginal-or-indigenous)

### **Gender**

Gender is all the different ways we express and feel who we are. There are many genders, like girl, boy, non-binary, sistergirl, brotherboy, agender, genderfluid, and others. Your understanding of your own gender can depend on things like your culture, sexuality, religion, and many other parts of your life.

Gender is a personal sense of your own gender, like girl, boy, non-binary, agender, and many others. There are many genders, and they can be expressed and felt in lots of different ways.

**Example:** “Gender roles can make it hard for some people to be who they are.”   
**See also:** gender diversity, transgender, cisgender, non-binary, queer, pronouns  
**Source:** [Hayden Moon for Junkee](https://junkee.com/brotherboy-sistergirl-decolonise-gender/262222)

### **Gender diversity**

Gender diversity is about people whose gender is different from what they were assumed to be at birth. Trans people and non-binary people are often called gender diverse.

**Example:** “We need more representation of gender diversity in media.”  
**See also:** gender, transgender, non-binary

### **Homophobia**

Homophobia is discrimination against gay people, lesbians, or people who are attracted to the same gender.

**Example:** “Not allowing a gay couple to get married is homophobic.”  
**See also:** LGBTQIA+, discrimination

### **Human rights**

Human rights are principles, values, freedoms and standards that everyone deserves.

**Example:** “Education is a human right.”

### **Incarceration**

Incarceration is when you are held somewhere like a jail or prison. Before going to jail, people can be held in a temporary incarceration called ‘custody’.

**Example:** “Lots of reports have shown that incarceration of Aboriginal young people in Australia is very concerning.”  
**Source:** [Simone Fox Koob for The Age](https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/indigenous-kids-nine-times-more-like-to-be-in-custody-than-non-indigenous-children-in-victoria-20210120-p56vlt.html)

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion happens when you do things that make it easier for people to be part of something.

**Example:** “We made the book club free to join. That way everyone was included because they didn’t have to worry about paying money.”

### **Indigenise**

Indigenise means putting something into the control of the people who belong to that place. It can also mean making something fit their cultural norms or values.

**Example:** “The path to Indigenise the planet starts by walking in the footsteps of our ancestors.”\*  
**\*Source:** [Indigenise](https://indigenise.com/)

### **Indigenous**

Indigenous is a word used to describe all First Nations people. It is used all over the world. Make sure you check with the specific group you are talking about so you use the words they want you to use.

**Example:** “We work to affect change by upholding Indigenous knowledges, voices and ways of being.” - [Indigenous X](https://indigenousx.com.au/about-us/)**See also:** Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islander People, First Peoples/First Nations, Traditional Custodians  
**Sources:** [Common Ground](https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/aboriginal-or-indigenous)

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is how all your different experiences and identities make you unique. It helps us understand how people can experience life and situations differently, even when they have some things in common.

**Example:** “I am a white disabled woman, and my best friend is a Pakistani non-disabled woman. We both understand being a woman in society, but our experiences are different because of our intersectionality.”

## **J-M**

### **Justice**

Justice is about fairness and people receiving what they deserve. Sometimes you will hear about this when talking about the justice system.

**Example:** “There is no climate justice without First Nations justice.”

### **Justice system**

The Victorian justice system includes: policy making, law reform, police, courts, dispute resolution, penalties, prisons and corrections services, legal assistance and victim support.

**Example:** “The overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system is a national crisis.”  
**See also:** justice, incarceration  
**Sources:** [The Department of Justice and Community Safety](https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/justice-system), [the Parliament of Australia](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Committees_Exposed/atsia/sentencing/report/chapter2)

### **LGBTIQA+**

LGBTIQA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual/Aromantic, and many more. It is an umbrella term for gender and sexual identities that are outside of heterosexual (straight) and cisgender (cis).

**Example:** “I am questioning my gender and sexuality, so going to the LGBTIQA+ book shop helps me feel safe and happy.”  
**See also:** transgender, queer, non-binary, gender diversity

### **Lived experience**

Lived experience is about how your own life and identity give you unique knowledge that you can only get from experiencing it for yourself.

**Example:** “Farhat migrated to Australia. He can use his lived experience of this to help other migrants.”

### **Mental health/mental illness**

Mental health describes someone’s emotional and psychological wellbeing. Mental illness is when someone’s mental health is bad, and they might need extra help to do the things they want to do. Everyone has mental health, but only some people have mental illness.

**Example:** “Mental health is like physical health, you have to do things to take care of yourself.”

### **Misgendering**

Misgendering is referring to someone with words (for example, pronouns or titles) that disrespect their gender.

**Example:** “I’m tired of being misgendered and being called ‘sir’ when I answer the phone.”  
**See also:** pronouns, sexism, transphobia

### **Misogyny**

Misogyny is the discrimination and violence against women. Transmisogyny is the combination of misogyny and transphobia.

**Example:** “Lara’s workplace is so misogynistic, they pay her less for the same job the men do.”  
**See also:** sexism

### **Multicultural**

Multicultural describes groups who have different cultures to the ‘dominant culture’. Here in Victoria, Anglo/white Australian is considered the dominant culture. We often don’t consider Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures as ‘multicultural’. This is to respect that they are the original cultures of this Land.

**Example:** “The Australian GLBTIQ Multicultural Council (AGMC) is a multicultural group that connects queer people of all different cultures in Australia.”  
**See also:** CALD, multifaith

### **Multifaith**

Multifaith describes people who have different religions or faiths to the ‘dominant religion’. Here in Victoria, Christianity is considered the dominant faith. We often don’t consider Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander faiths as ‘multifaith’. This is to respect that they are the original faiths of this land.

**Example:** “The Jewish Christian Muslim Association (JCMA) is a multifaith organisation that connects Jewish, Christian and Muslim Australians. They show people how to accept different religions.”   
**See also:** multicultural

## **N-Q**

### **NDIS**

The NDIS is short for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. It is a government program which supports disabled people in Australia. It gives money to people so they can get the services and things they need in everyday life.

**Example:** “The NDIS helped me get a new wheelchair when my old one broke.”

### **Non-binary**

Non-binary is a term for genders that are outside the gender binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Sometimes non-binary is how a person describes their own gender, and sometimes it describes more specific labels, like agender or genderfluid.

**Example:** “Some non-binary people identify as trans, some don’t. There is no ‘look’ to non-binary.”  
**See also:** binary, gender diversity, transgender

### **Oppression**

Oppression is when a group of people is treated unfairly by a group that has more privilege. Lots of different ‘-ism’ words, like racism, ableism, or sexism, are specific types of oppression. Lots of ‘-phobia’ words, like homophobia and transphobia, are also specific types of oppression.

**Example:** “The oppression of people of colour in Australia is upheld systemic racism.”  
**See also:** privilege

### **Peer worker**

A peer worker is someone who guides or works with a group of people because they share the same lived experience.

**Example:** “The peer worker for the student working group is an 18-year-old who is in high school.”  
**See also:** lived experience

### **People of colour (POC)**

‘People of colour’ (sometimes also called POC) are people who are not white. This is an umbrella term for many different groups, like people who are Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and many others. Where possible, it’s best to ask someone what language they prefer.

**See also:** BIPOC, CALD  
**Source:** [Luke Pearson for the ABC](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-01/who-identifies-as-poc-in-australia/9200288)

### **Privilege**

Privilege is when you have advantages other people don’t. This isn’t your fault, but it also isn’t something you earned.

**Example:** “White privilege happens when people get more opportunities at work just for being white.”

### **Pronouns**

Pronouns are words that are used to describe people when you aren’t using their name, for example: ‘he/him’, ‘she/her’, ‘they/them’, ‘ze/zir’. Everyone has pronouns, and using the right ones for someone is a way to respect their gender.

**Example:** “Ronnie is coming over this afternoon. It's been a long time since I saw zir.”

### **Queer**

Queer is an umbrella term for gender and sexual minorities that are not cisgender (cis) or heterosexual (straight). For some people, queer is their specific identity. For other people it is a general term, where they have other labels underneath the umbrella that describe their identity.

**Example:** “I'm a lesbian, and I love being part of the broader queer community!”  
**See also:** LGBTIQA+

## **R-S**

### **Racism**

Racism is discrimination against somebody because of their race, culture or religion. Anyone can be racist, but racist ideas come from race privilege and harmful stereotypes. Racism does not have to be ‘obvious’ to be hurtful.

**Example:** “The levels of racism amongst many white Australians seem to match the levels of denial about their being racist.” -Sisonke Msimang\*  
**See also:** privilege, stereotype  
**\*Source:** [Sisonke Msimang for Africa is a Country](https://africasacountry.com/2015/04/tony-abbott-is-the-face-of-monoculturalism-in-australia)

### **Self-determination**

Self-determination is about having control over yourself and your community without other people stepping in and intervening.

**Example:** “Self-determination is extremely important to the Indigenous community. With Australia’s history of total government control over the lives of its First Peoples, deciding what language we spoke, what our names were, if we could live with or see our family, even deciding whether or not we could marry the person we wanted, it comes as no surprise that we value the prospect of being back in control.” - Georgia Mae Capocchi-Hunter\*  
**\*Source:** [Georgia Mae Capocchi-Hunter for Deadly Story](https://www.deadlystory.com/page/culture/my-stories/self-determination)

### **Sexism**

Sexism is discrimination against somebody because of their gender, by somebody who has gender privilege.

**Example:** “It’s sexist to not let someone join in just because they are a girl.”

### **Slur**

A slur is a word or phrase with a disrespectful meaning. It is usually used by people with privilege, to discriminate against others. Slurs can be reclaimed by the group who have had them used against them, as a form of empowerment.

**Example:** “Queer used to be a slur, but now we use it proudly!”  
**See also:** discrimination, privilege

### **Sovereignty**

Sovereignty is when the people of a place have control of themselves and their land.

**Example:** “‘Sovereignty was never ceded’ is a common phrase that means Aboriginal people never gave up their sovereignty over this Land to Britain.”   
**Source:** [Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)](https://www.vacca.org/content/Document/VACCA_Treaty_FAQs.pdf)

### **Stereotype**

A stereotype is an over-generalised belief about a group. It is often based on harmful and incorrect ideas that come from discrimination.

**Example:** “The stereotype that teenagers are lazy is untrue and harmful. It can stop us from getting jobs if people believe it.”

### **Stigma**

Stigma is when others make you feel negative or ashamed for something about you. Normally this is because they don’t like it, not because it is actually bad.

**Example:** “When talking about mental health is stigmatised, it makes it hard to tell someone that you’re going through a tough time.”

### **Strengths-based approach**

A strengths-based approach is when you take action or support someone by focusing on their strengths.

**Example:** “Max is really good at social media, so they should be in charge of the Instagram page for our campaign.”

### **SWERF**

‘SWERF’ stands for Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminist’. It describes someone who thinks feminism should exclude sex workers, just because they disagree with sex work.

**Example:** “SWERFs can be very damaging for the feminist movement.”   
**See also:** feminism, TERF

## **T-Z**

## **Traditional Custodians**

A custodian is someone responsible for taking care of or protecting something. When we talk about ‘Traditional Custodians’, we are talking about the Aboriginal people who have always taken care of and protected their Country.

**Example:** “[We] would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways of Australia.”  
See also: Country/Land  
**Source:** [Culture is Life](https://www.cultureislife.org/project/koorie-youth-participation-resource-koorie-youth-council/)

### **TERF**

‘TERF’ stands for ‘Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist’. TERFs claim to be feminists but are actively transphobic in their activism.

**Example:** “TERFs may hold beliefs such as: the value of the gender binary, gender being determined by assumed sex at birth, and harmful beliefs about trans women.”  
**See also:** feminism, SWERF

### **Transgender (trans)**

Transgender or trans is an umbrella label for people whose gender identity is different from the one assumed at birth.

**Example:** “Historically, transgender has been used to discuss trans people who fit within the gender binary, but many non-binary and gender diverse people are also trans.”   
**See also:** gender diversity, non-binary, LGBTQIA+, queer

### **Transphobia**

Transphobia is the discrimination against trans and non-binary people.

**Example:** “Misgendering trans people is transphobia, and that is not tolerated at this conference.”  
**See also:** discrimination, misogyny, sexism, TERF

### **White guilt**

White guilt describes the guilt white people feel when they learn about how harmful racism is. White guilt may cause white people to ignore racism, or to only take action against racism to make themselves feel better.

**Example:** “White people should take action to support Aboriginal people all the time, not just when they are feeling white guilt on January 26.”

### **White feminism**

White feminism is a type of feminism that only focuses on white women and leaves out everyone else. It is not considered intersectional.

**Example:** “White feminists don’t acknowledge how other aspects of identity are just as important as gender.”  
**See also:** feminism, intersectionality

### **Youth Advisory Council (YAC) or Youth Advisory Group (YAG)**

A Youth Advisory Council (YAC) or Youth Advisory Group (YAG) is a group of young people that an organisation will ask to work on projects with them. This can be by asking for their opinions, or giving them tasks. It’s one way of making sure good results for young people are achieved.

**Example:** “We started a YAG at our netball club so that our coaches can hear what’s important to us next season.”

### **Youth participation**

Youth participation is when young people are included in decision-making on things that affect them.

**Example:** “We need more youth participation to help decide how we will renovate the school.”