

# WHAT IS AN ALLY?

As educators for LGBTQ equality and belonging, we hear a lot about allyship. We want to share some core definitions and tools with you to support your work in actively strengthening and building LGBTQ affirming communities where every individual can be seen and valued.

The following is an excerpt from our Allyship training - this resource is meant as a starting place and tool for conversation. Many of the tools and concepts described here are useful when talking about oppression and allyship for any group, and we have also outlined the ways that they may play out specifically in the context of LGBTQ equality. However, none of these concepts applies only to LGBTQ equality. The activists of the Combahee River Collective coined the phrase “interlocking systems of oppression”<sup>1</sup> to describe the ways in which different systems of oppression overlap and interact, often particularly impacting those who live in multiply-marginalized identities.

If you would like to have further conversations with Keshet educators about allyship and build on these skills with your community, please do not hesitate to reach out to learn more!

## Definitions:

### Allyship:

The process of being in relationship with people who hold a marginalized identity that you do not share, and using your own platform, privilege, or power to work with them to increase safety, dignity, and belonging for members of that group.

Allyship is action-oriented, accountable, and ongoing, and may look different from situation to situation. Being an ally does not mean that you will get everything right, it means that you will listen, learn, and grow when you do not.

### Intervention:

An action intended to prevent, interrupt, or mitigate harm of a marginalized person or group. Interventions may take place on an institutional or an interpersonal level.

### Advocacy / Activism:

Actions designed to change the policies and structures of oppression that impact a marginalized group. Advocacy and activism should ideally be conducted under the leadership of those most directly impacted by the policies and structures in question.

## Understanding Marginalization and Oppression

---

<sup>1</sup> Combahee River Collective, A Black Feminist Statement, 1977.

# WHAT IS AN ALLY?

One framework for understanding marginalization and oppression is the 4 I's. This framework helps outline the ways that oppression might play out in different layers. These layers are not mutually exclusive – in fact, they actively reinforce and play off one another. This is a framework that has been developed and refined by many generations of activists of many identities, and Keshet does not claim credit for it.

**Ideological** oppression is the idea that one group is somehow more deserving, better, or more moral than other groups. When applied to anti-LGBTQ oppression, ideological oppression may be expressed in terms of religious or pseudo-scientific beliefs that being cisgender and straight is “moral,” “natural,” etc. and that being LGBT or Q is “deviant,” “unnatural,” “hypersexualized,” etc. These ideas are used explicitly and implicitly to justify oppression and marginalization of LGBTQ people.

**Institutional** oppression refers to the ways that bias becomes embedded in the institutions of society. When some groups have access to services, protections, and systems that others do not have access to, this is institutional oppression. This can take place explicitly (laws or policies that directly apply differently to some groups in different ways than others) or implicitly (seemingly “neutral” policies that consistently have the impact of benefitting some groups at the expense of others). When applied to anti-LGBTQ oppression, institutional oppression can include formal and informal discrimination against transgender people seeking to access healthcare, policies barring transgender individuals from accessing physical facilities or participating in sports, activities, or groups, legal recognition and protections for different-gender families and parents that do not apply to same-gender families or parents, etc.

**Interpersonal** oppression refers to the ways that individual interpersonal interactions can reflect and reinforce the ideas about dominant and marginalized groups that are described above. This may include insults, jokes, or slights, or concrete acts of discrimination, and may take place consciously or unconsciously. When applied to anti-LGBTQ oppression, this may include an individual not renting a room or offering a job to an LGBTQ applicant, refusing to call transgender individuals by their names or pronouns, and LGBTQ people experiencing their identities as the subject of jokes or insults on a regular basis.

**Internalized** oppression refers to the ways that marginalized groups can take in the messages about them that are communicated by ideology, institutions, and interpersonal interactions. When we are surrounded by constant stereotypes and negative messages, it takes active work to reject them and build empowerment, and positive identity.

Some thinkers also talk about a 5<sup>th</sup> “I” – oppression and bias can also be **Implicit**.

**Implicit** bias is not a separate level of oppression, but is active at all four levels. It refers to the attitudes, stereotypes, and assumptions that we're not even aware of, and often run counter to

# WHAT IS AN ALLY?

our consciously held values. These implicit assumptions can impact our everyday words, actions, and choices, particularly when we are already under stress or in a hurry.

*Definition adapted from Dr Sue, <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions>*

One other important concept is the concept of Microaggressions:

Microaggressions are defined as the everyday, subtle, intentional — and **oftentimes unintentional** — interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups.

*- Kevin Nadal, professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

Microaggressions often appear to be a compliment or a joke, but contain a hidden insult about a group of people.

*- Dr. Derald Wing Sue*

Microaggressions often are rooted in implicit bias.

# WHAT IS AN ALLY?

## Small Actions/Big Impacts: Examples of Microaggressions and their Impacts

Action/Example	The Message/Impact	Notes
“Can you speak on our panel? We want to hear about <i>the</i> LGBTQ experience.”	Expecting someone of any particular group to ‘represent’ the perspectives of others of their race, gender, etc. in discussions or debates.	Each person’s experiences are unique, and it puts unfair pressure on one person to represent an entire identity. It is also not possible.
[In response to a person describing a painful experience they had] “She probably didn’t mean it / You must have misunderstood / It must not have been because of bias / etc.”	Responding to this kind of vulnerable sharing by denying the validity of the problematic experience implies that a person does not have ownership over their own experiences or story and can compound the hurt.	This very quickly makes the speaker feel like an unsafe person to go to for support in difficult moments. Many hurtful interactions take place in subtle or unconscious ways, which can make them seem invisible to a person who is not experiencing them, but their impacts are very real.
“It’s just so hard to remember your pronouns / ‘they/them’ just does not feel grammatically right to me / I just have a hard time not thinking of you as ‘he’ anymore / etc”	This implies that the speaker’s ease is more important than the dignity of the person being addressed, implies that some sets of pronouns are more ‘valid’ than others, and places the burden on the trans individual to defend their ability to be addressed with respect.	
“What’s your real name?” “Is your name a nickname?”	These questions imply that the name someone gives you is not their real name and comes across as invalidating their identity.	Unless you need someone’s legal name for paperwork, use the name someone gives you for all communication. When asking for legal names for

# WHAT IS AN ALLY?

		paperwork purposes, it is helpful to specify why the information is needed.
<p>“Are you going to do a real/complete transition? / Are you going to get ‘the surgery’ How/when?”</p>	<p>In addition to being deeply invasive, this kind of question implies that some trans people are “real” while others are not “real,” and bases this on their bodies. It assumes that there is only one way to transition, and that those who either do not wish to or cannot access particular medical procedures are “less than” those who can. It also assumes that there is some reason why the speaker needs to “verify” or “validate” a trans person’s identity.</p>	<p>Each person deserves dignity and privacy around their body. There are extremely few cases in which this information is relevant. No one owes you this information, and there is a long history of trans people having their bodies questioned, mocked, exoticized, or harmed. There’s no such thing as a ‘real’ or ‘complete’ transition. Whatever a person does/doesn’t do to affirm their trans identity is valid, and each person should be treated with dignity without having to “prove” their identity.</p>
<p>“What body parts do you have (i.e. do you have breasts, penis, vagina, etc.)?”</p>	<p>This assumes that the bodies of transgender people are fair game for the curiosity of others, or that others have the right to evaluate one’s identity based on one’s body. This can be extremely invalidating.</p>	<p>You would never ask a non-trans (cisgender) person this, and you shouldn’t ask a trans person either. This highly personal question is triggering and irrelevant in most contexts.</p>