
Understanding Gender

What is Gender?

For many people, the terms “gender” and “sex” are used interchangeably, and thus incorrectly. This idea has become so common, particularly in western societies, that it is rarely questioned. We are born, assigned a sex, and sent out into the world. For many people, this is cause for little, if any dissonance. Yet biological sex and gender are different; gender is not inherently nor solely connected to one’s physical anatomy.

Biological Gender (sex) includes physical attributes such as external genitalia, sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, and internal reproductive structures. At birth, it is used to **assign sex**, that is, to identify individuals as male or female. *Gender* on the other hand is far more complicated. It is the complex interrelationship between an individual’s **sex** (gender biology), **one’s internal sense** of self as male, female, both or neither (gender identity) as well as one’s **outward presentations** and behaviors (gender expression) related to that perception. Together, the intersection of these three dimensions produces one’s authentic sense of gender, both in how people experience their own gender as well as how others perceive it.

The Gender Spectrum

Western culture has come to view gender as a **binary** concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female, both grounded in a person’s physical anatomy. When a child is born, a quick glance between the legs determines the gender label that the child will carry for life. But even if gender is to be restricted to basic biology, a binary concept still fails to capture the rich variation that exists. Rather than just two distinct boxes, biological gender occurs across a continuum of possibilities. This **spectrum** of anatomical variations by itself should be enough to disregard the simplistic notions of a binary gender system.

But beyond anatomy, there are multiple domains defining gender. In turn, these domains can be independently characterized across a range of possibilities. Instead of the static, binary model produced through a solely physical understanding of gender, a far richer tapestry of biology, gender expression, and gender identity intersect in a multidimensional array of possibilities. Quite simply, the **gender spectrum** represents a more nuanced, and ultimately truly authentic model of human gender.

Falling Into Line

Gender is all around us. Like water surrounding creatures in the sea, we are often unaware of its ever-present nature. Gender is actually taught to us from the moment we are born. Gender expectations and messages bombard us constantly. Upbringing, culture, peers, schools, community, media, and religion are some of the many influences that shape our understanding of this core aspect of self. How you learned and interacted with gender as a young child directly influences how you view the world today. Gendered interactions between parent and child begin as soon as the sex of the baby is known. In short, many aspects of gender are socially constructed, particularly with regard to gender expression.

Like other social constructs, gender is closely monitored and reinforced by society. Practically everything in society is assigned a gender—toys, colors, clothes and behaviors are just some of the more obvious examples. Through a combination of social conditioning and personal preference, by age three most children prefer activities and exhibit behaviors typically associated with their sex. Accepted social gender roles and expectations are so entrenched in our culture that most people cannot imagine any other way. As a result, individuals fitting neatly into these expectations rarely if ever question what *gender* really means. They have never had to, because the system has worked for them.

About Gender Expansiveness

"**Gender expansive**" is an umbrella term used for individuals that broaden commonly held definitions of gender, including its expression, associated identities, and/or other perceived gender norms, in one or more aspects of their life. These individuals expand the definition of gender through their own identity and/or expression. Some individuals do not identify with being either male or female; others identify as a blend of both, while still others identify with a gender, but express their gender in ways that differ from stereotypical presentations. A gender expansive person's preferences and self-expression may fall outside commonly understood gender norms within their own culture; or they may be aligned with them even as one's internal gender identity doesn't align with the sex assigned at birth.

This diversity of gender is a normal part of the human experience, across cultures and throughout history. Non-binary gender diversity exists all over the world, documented by countless historians and anthropologists. Examples of individuals living comfortably outside of typical male/female expectations and/or identities are found in every region of the globe. The *calabai*, and *calalai* of Indonesia, two-spirit Native Americans, and the *hijra* of India all represent more complex understandings of gender than allowed for by a simplistic binary model.

Further, what might be considered gender expansive in one period of history may become gender normative in another. One need only examine trends related to men wearing earrings or women sporting tattoos to quickly see the malleability of social expectations about gender. Even the seemingly intractable "pink is for girls, blue is for boys" notions are relatively new. While there is some debate about the reasons why they reversed, what is well documented is that not until the mid-twentieth century were notions of pink for girls or blue for boys so firmly ensconced. You can make the case that "pink is the new blue!"

Gender And Privilege

When someone is "typically gendered," they benefit from gender privilege. For individuals whose biological sex, gender expression, and gender identity neatly align, often referred to as "cisgender," there is a level of congruence as they encounter the world around them. Like many forms of social privilege, this is frequently an unexamined aspect of their lives. Forms they fill out, the clothing stores in which they shop, or identification papers they carry bring few if any second thoughts. Yet for a transgender or otherwise gender expansive person, each of these, and many more examples, is a constant reminder that they move about in a culture that really does not account for their own experience. Social privilege comes from an assumption that one's own perspective is universal; whether related to race, or language, or gender, privilege comes from being part of the "norm." Or, as Dorothy Soelle aptly described it: *Privilege is being able to choose what you will not see.*

To understand this more intuitively, think about the last time you were in a public setting and needed to use a restroom. For cisgender individuals, this rarely presents a problem or question (issues of cleanliness notwithstanding!). Yet for an individual who does not fit into narrowly defined expectations of gender presentation or identity, restroom use can present a whole host of challenges, sometimes even becoming a matter of life and death. The daily need to make judgments about what one does, or wears, or says based on other people's perceptions of their gender is a burden that many people never encounter. These everyday reminders of being different are also constant reinforcement of being "other."

Conclusion

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of a person's identity, gender deeply influences every part of one's life. In a society where this crucial aspect of self has been so narrowly defined and rigidly enforced, individuals who exist outside its norms face innumerable challenges. Even those who vary only slightly from the norm can become targets of disapproval. Yet this does not have to be the case forever. Through a thoughtful consideration of the uniqueness and validity of every person's experiences of self, we can develop greater acceptance for all. Not only will this create greater inclusion for individuals who challenge the norms of gender, it will actually create space for all individuals to more fully explore and celebrate who they are.