

Reimagine Gender

UNDERSTANDING GENDER



Gender is a word you've probably heard a thousand times; discussions about gender are everywhere. But if you're like most people, you may not have thought much about it, and what you've read and heard may have left you more bewildered than when you started. We're here to help.

Before we discuss what gender is, let's start with what it isn't since that is often a source of confusion.

● SEX

People tend to use the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably. But, while connected, the two terms are not equivalent. Generally, we determine a newborn's sex as either male or female (some US states and other countries offer a third option) based on the baby's genitals, and we assume based on someone's sex that they will develop certain biological traits (levels of certain hormones, specific physical characteristics appearing around puberty, etc.). While we are often taught that bodies can either be physically “female” or “male,” there are intersex traits that demonstrate that sex exists across a continuum of possibilities.

◆ SEXUALITY/SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Gender and sexual orientation are two distinct, but related, aspects of self. Gender is personal (how we see ourselves), while sexual orientation is interpersonal (who we are physically, emotionally and/or romantically attracted to). While these are two different aspects of who we are, our sexual orientation is related to gender because it is defined by our gender and the gender(s) of people we are attracted to. Because of this relationship, new gender identity terms have expanded the language of sexual identities as well.

A person's gender is the complex interrelationship between three dimensions: **body**, **identity** and **social**.



BODY

Our body, our experience of our own body, how society genders bodies, and how others interact with us based on our body.

As stated earlier, most societies view sex as a binary concept, and equate a person's sex with their gender. So a baby designated as female at birth is assumed to be a girl/woman and a male is assumed to be a boy/man. The relationship between a person's gender and their body goes beyond one's reproductive functions. Research in neurology, endocrinology, and cellular biology suggests a broader biological basis for an individual's experience of gender. In fact, research increasingly points to our brains playing a key role in how we each experience our gender. Bodies themselves are also gendered by cultural expectations. Masculinity and femininity are equated with certain physical attributes, labeling us as more or less a man or woman based on the degree to which those attributes are present. This gendering of our bodies affects how we feel about ourselves and how others perceive and interact with us.



IDENTITY

The name we use to convey our gender based on our internal sense of self.

Identities typically fall into binary (e.g., man, woman), non-binary (e.g., genderqueer, genderfluid) and ungendered (e.g., agender, genderless) categories; the meaning associated with a particular identity can vary among individuals using the same term. Gender is an inherent aspect of a person. Individuals do not choose their gender, nor can they be made to change it. However, the term someone uses to communicate their gender identity may change over time. A person's gender identity can correspond to or differ from the sex they were designated at birth.



How we present our gender in the world (including clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms) and how individuals, society, culture, and community perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender.

Social gender includes gender roles and expectations and how society uses those to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms. Practically everything is given a gender — toys, colors and clothes are some of the more obvious examples. Expectations regarding gender are communicated through every aspect of our lives, including family, culture, peers, schools, community, media, and religion. Gender roles and expectations are so entrenched that it's difficult to imagine things any other way. People who express gender outside of these social norms often have a difficult experience. Because expectations around gender are so rigid, we frequently assume that what someone wears, or how they move, talk, or express themselves, tells us something about their gender identity. But expression is distinct from identity — we can't assume a person's gender identity based on their gender expression. For example, a boy may like to wear skirts or dresses. His choice in clothing doesn't define his gender identity; it simply means that he prefers (at least some of the time) to wear clothes that society has typically associated with girls. In fact, how we interpret a person's gender and the assumptions we make about them is related to our personal understanding of gender and the norms and stereotypes we have integrated — it isn't about them.

TWO FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT GENDER

Most of us have had the experience of wearing something that just doesn't feel right — we simply don't feel like ourselves in it. We call that experience of feeling right in something congruence. Gender congruence is an experience of harmony in our gender, and it means:

- comfort in our body as it relates to our gender;
- naming of our gender that adequately corresponds with our internal sense of who we are;
- being able to express ourselves through clothing, mannerisms, interests and activities;
- and being seen by others as we see ourselves.

Finding congruence is an ongoing process throughout our lives as we continue to grow and gain insight into ourselves. It is most often found through exploration. For some, finding congruence is fairly simple; for others, it is a much more complex process. But the fundamental need to find gender congruence is true for us all, and any degree to which we don't experience it can be distressing.

While the dimensions of gender and the desire for congruence are common to us all, ultimately gender is personal. Each of us is more than our gender: we are also shaped by our ancestry, ethnicity, class, faith, sense of geographic place, family, disabilities, personal characteristics and more. Our gender is personal because, while we share some of these aspects of self with others, the way that all of these identities, influences and characteristics come together is unique to each of us.

To learn more about working with Reimagine Gender, visit reimaginegender.org or contact info@reimaginegender.org.