

A Quick Learning Guide to Gender Terms and Definitions

Is Gender Different from Sex?

Until the mid-20th century, sex and gender were considered to be coextensive. The concept of gender did not exist separate from sex; therefore, the concept of sex included many social prescriptions associated with gender today. Since the 1950s, some psychologists and sexologists have begun to define the term gender as distinct from sex. Among these researchers, particularly significant was the work conducted by Dr John Money. According to Money, gender includes everything a person says or does to reveal that they have the status of a boy, man, girl or woman.

Despite its roots in medicine and psychology, the sex/gender distinction was widely adopted by the feminist movement in the 1970s. The distinction between sex and gender was originally thematised within feminist thought to counter biological determinism. Feminists have aimed to show how gender should not be reduced to sex and how sex differences are often borrowed to attribute certain character traits or others to recognise or not recognise certain rights, leading, for example to disqualification or favour access to specific jobs. Among the first authors to address the issue of the difference between sex and gender is the feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir, who states in *The Second Sex* (1949/2011) that “one is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines to figure that the human female acquires in society” (p. 330).

What is Sex?

In biology, the term 'sex' can mean different things, which can be a source of profound misunderstandings. It is reasonable to start with a preliminary semantic clarification. The term 'sex' can cover three distinct processes that are often confused with each other.

- The term sex can refer to the sexuality of organisms, i.e. the process by which two individuals of the same species exchange half (or part) of their genetic material;
- It can also mean the actual mating process;
- It can stand for the reproductive process that leads to the production of one or more new organisms from two (in some cases, one) parents.

The term 'sex' is also used to refer to two categories.

- The first is that of 'Sexual Categories', such as 'male' and 'female';

- The second is 'Sexual Characters', generally used as indicators that an organism belongs to a specific sexual category (typically the external genital apparatus).

The confusion in the use of the meanings of sex is partly responsible for the widespread belief that an individual's sex coincides with their gender. Underlying this false belief is the fact that it is often assumed that there is always a close correlation between sexual category, sexual characteristics and an individual's gender. In other words, according to this belief, if an individual possesses specific sexual characteristics, then they necessarily belong to a particular sexual category, and if they belong to that specific sexual category, their gender is determined by it. Unfortunately, things are much more complicated than that.

A first observation is that the boundary between sexual characters is somewhat blurred. Male and female characters are often present to different degrees and numbers in the same individual. Several characters can be considered to determine to which sexual category a human being belongs. Relevant indicators include 'chromosomal sex', 'gonadal sex' and 'hormonal sex'. But external genitalia and secondary sexual traits such as beard, depth of voice or shoulder width can also be distinctive clues.

Precisely because of the large number of characteristics that can be considered as sex markers of an individual, placing human beings in one or the other category is not automatic. For this reason, biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling suggests that many more sexual categories are needed to describe this complex biological and psychological reality. This proposal encounters many obstacles, mainly due to the social and cultural situation we are immersed in. The idea that there are only two sexes is deeply rooted in Western culture. One only has to think of the poverty of language that forces us to attribute one and only one sex by choosing between male or female. But if language reflects society, society does not reflect the biological state of affairs, where there is a broad spectrum of possibilities between males and females. Fausto-Sterling proposes to identify, in that spectrum, at least three other sexual categories:

- 'herm', the so-called 'genuine hermaphrodites' who present testis and ovary at the same time;
- 'merm' and 'ferm', the so-called 'pseudohermaphrodites', for whom the ambiguity is at the level of phenotypic sex (male pseudohermaphrodites present some aspects of the female external genitalia and male gonads; female pseudohermaphrodites have some elements of the male genitalia but have ovaries and not testes).

It is interesting to note that, in reality, the sexual spectrum could be further differentiated, as each of the three highlighted categories is complex and, in turn, includes very different individuals. Typically, sexual ambiguities of this kind have been treated as abnormalities, to be restored to the male-female dichotomy through surgery and hormonal treatment. Yet these are not isolated cases: intersex individuals may constitute 1.7% of births, according to experts.

The complexity and nuances of sexual characters influence what we can call the 'sexual spectrum', i.e. how many and which sexual categories there are. The relationship between sexual characters and sexual categories also raises central questions such as what their criteria are, whether their boundaries are clear and defined, whether these categories reflect divisions that exist in nature, or whether they are impositions dictated by our minds and our cognitive and linguistic practices.

What is Gender?

As anticipated, there is a tendency in common thinking to identify sexual categories with gender. This means that 'male' and 'man', 'female' and 'woman' are believed to be overlapping terms. However, not only might the sexes be more than two, but they might not go hand in hand with their respective genders. We can take as an example one of the many clinical testimonies. The one we are looking at concerns an athlete: María José Martínez Patiño. Martínez Patiño was a Spanish athlete who competed as a hurdler at the national level. Born and raised in northern Spain as a girl, at the age of twenty-four she underwent a sexuality test in order to attend the World University Games in Japan. After careful examination, the result was that her chromosomal sex was XY, i.e. male. Martínez Patiño has androgen insensitivity syndrome, so at the moment of her conception, her tissues had not received the hormonal message telling them to 'become male'. In this case, the presence of a particular sexual character (the male Y chromosome) led the doctors who performed the genetic test on her to declare her not female and place her in the 'male' sexual category. However, this verdict not only ignores secondary characters, i.e. all those phenotypic aspects such as the presence of breasts and vagina, the absence of a beard, etc., but also her feeling as a woman, i.e. her gender.

The distinction between sex (understood as sexual categories) and gender was thematised by feminist thought. If sex is determined by biological traits, gender, on the other hand, is shaped by social/cultural factors. The term gender, therefore, arose as distinct from sex to indicate psychological, proprioceptive, behavioural and social aspects. Thus it becomes clear how the sexual category (biologically determined) and gender (socially constructed) can diverge. The distinction between sex and gender becomes a helpful tool for accounting for phenomena such as transsexuality and, in feminist studies, becomes a valuable tool for analysing the social condition of women.

What is Intersectionality?

For the purposes of this course, it is important to introduce another term: intersectionality. The term 'intersectionality' refers to a theoretical, methodological and social approach based on considering the diversity of aspects that make up our identities and how these intertwine to create particular situations of disadvantage or privilege in a given social context.

These aspects may include gender identity, skin colour, ethnic origin, age, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, disability, family status, territorial origin, migration status, socio-economic status, etc. The complex web of these elements contributes to shaping people's identities and social positions. Moreover, all those aspects interact with existing power systems determining access to resources, fundamental rights and opportunities.

For example, a black woman's experience is qualitatively different from that of a white woman. It is likely to be more complex and challenging. This diversity stems from intertwined systems of inequality, exclusion and discrimination that expose the person on multiple fronts. Protection systems, laws and social services generally fail to capture the discriminatory experience found in these intersections. So, often, these discriminations remain invisible. The central point of intersectionality is the need to develop a theoretical tool that can read all the multifaced dimensions that coexist in a single person simultaneously.

Therefore, researchers should not consider gender or sex in isolation. An intersectional approach is vital when setting research priorities, developing hypotheses and formulating study designs. Adopting an intersectional approach can lead to more inclusive research. The intersectional analysis must be designed to illuminate the multiplicative effects of different but interdependent categories and factors. Determining which methods are best suited to examine project-relevant intersecting variables is a fundamental task that researchers must consider when designing their research.