



GENDER and SEX

A sample of definitions

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Sex = Gender?

The English-language distinction between the words sex and gender was first developed in the 1950s and 1960s by British and American psychiatrists and other medical personnel working with intersex and transsexual patients.¹ Since then, the term gender has been increasingly used to distinguish between sex as biological and gender as socially and culturally constructed. Feminists have used this terminology to argue against the 'biology is destiny' line, and gender and development approaches have widely adopted this system of analysis.

"Sex marks the distinction between women and men as a result of their biological, physical and genetic differences...Gender roles are set by convention and other social, economic, political and cultural forces"

(One World Action Glossary: <http://owa.netextra.net/indepth/project.jsp?project=206>)

From this perspective, sex is fixed and based in nature; gender is fluid and based in culture.² This distinction constitutes progress compared with 'biology is destiny'. However, it ignores the existence of persons who do not fit neatly into the biological or social categories of women and men, such as intersex, transgender, transsexual people and hijras.³ Furthermore, for many people the sex categories of female and male are neither fixed nor universal, but vary over time and across cultures. Accordingly, sex, like gender, is seen as a social and cultural construct.



'Where Are We?' This question asks what spaces there are for hijras' existence and visibility in the system of male and female sexes. (Poster by Bondhon, courtesy of Shonghoti, Bangladesh)

¹ Moi, T., 2005, *Sex, Gender and the Body*, New York: Oxford University Press

² Goldstein, J., 2003, *War and Gender*, Cambridge CUP, p2

³ Intersex people are born with some combination of male and female characteristics. Transsexual people are born with the body of one sex, but feel they belong to the 'opposite' sex. Transgender are those who feel they are neither male nor female, but somewhere in between. Hijras are a South Asian transgender population.

Gender and sex: a sample of definitions

This paper presents a range of definitions of gender and sex which reveal the diversity of individual and institutional understandings on these much-debated terms.

“Gender refers to the array of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. **Whereas biological sex is determined by genetic and anatomical characteristics, gender is an acquired identity** that is learned, changes over time, and varies widely within and across cultures. Gender is relational and refers not simply to women or men but to the relationship between them”. (INSTRAW, Glossary of Gender-related Terms and Concepts
www.un-instraw.org/en/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=37&Itemid=76)

“**Gender refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities** associated with being male or female at a particular point in time” (World Health Organization, 2001, Transforming health systems: gender and rights in reproductive health, <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/gender/glossary.html>)

“**Sex refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male.** While these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, they tend to differentiate humans as males and females”. (World Health Organization, 2002, Gender and Reproductive Rights: Working Definitions, http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/gender/sexual_health.html#1)

“**(Sex) in human beings is not a purely dichotomous variable.** It is not an evenly continuous one either.... **a fair number of human beings are markedly intersexual,** a number of them to the point where both sorts of external genitalia appear, or where developed breasts occur in an individual with male genitalia, and so on”. (Geertz, Clifford., 1983, Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology, New York: Basic Books, p81)

“If the immutable character of sex is contested, **perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender;** indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (Butler, Judith., 1990, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York & London: Routledge, Chapter 1: Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, p346)

“Gender is not what culture created out of my body’s sex; rather; **sex is what culture makes when it genders my body**” (Wilchins, transgender activist, quoted in Monroe, Surya., 2006, Gender Politics: Citizenship, Activism and Sexual Diversity, London: Pluto Press, p30)

“Gender categorisation can be best described as a large machine with lots of pins that dig into the sense of self and tear the mind to pieces. And in my situation, having been ‘surgically treated’ as a child...I see a lot of malice behind it” (Salamacis, quoted in Munro, S., 2006, *Gender Politics: Citizenship, Activism and Sexual Diversity*, London: Pluto Press, p47)

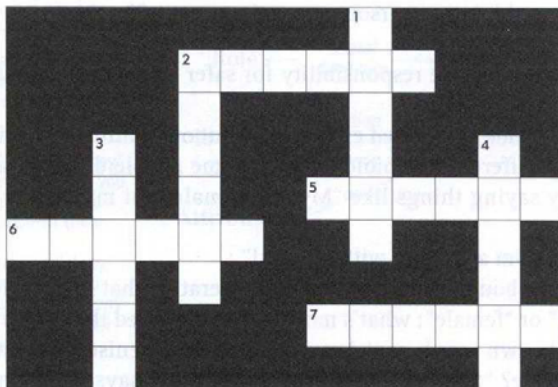
“We believe it is indispensable to deconstruct the binary sex/gender system that shapes the Western world so absolutely that in most cases it goes unnoticed. For ‘other sexualities to be possible’ it is indispensable and urgent that we stop governing ourselves by the absurd notion that only two possible body types exist, male and female, with only two genders inextricably linked to them, man and woman. We make trans and intersex issues our priority because their presence, activism and theoretical contributions show us the path to a new paradigm that will allow as many bodies, sexualities and identities to exist as those living in this world might wish to have, with each one of them respected, desired, celebrated” (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission [IGLHRC], 2005, Institutional Memoir of the 2005 Institute for Trans and Intersex Activist Training, p8 <http://www.iglhrc.org/files/iglhrc/LAC/ITIAT-Aug06-E.pdf>)

The Gender Puzzle

⊙ Solving the Gender Puzzle ⊙

So, what is gender anyway? It's not such a difficult puzzle after all.

⊙ The Not-So-Difficult Puzzle After All



ACROSS:

2. a fanatical cult, demanding blind obedience to mostly unwritten, unagreed-upon rules, regulations, and qualifications.
5. any standard (usually, but not necessarily biological) by which we can easily and without much thought conveniently divide the human race into two neat parcels. (e.g., sociological, genital, chromosomal, psychological, hormonal, et cetera, *ad nauseum*)
6. an oppressive class system of two and only two classes, usually held in place by the assumption that the class system is "natural," in which system one class has nearly total economic and political power over the other.
7. a means of cultural traction, an identity or persona by which to identify oneself to another or maintain some position within a relationship or culture.

DOWN:

1. currently a system of dividing people into one of two impossible-to-live-up-to standards: male or female.
3. a means by which we can express our sexual desire.
4. a means by which we can attract others, to whom we are attracted.

(Answers on page 33)

All answers: gender

Bornstein, Kate., 1998, My Gender Workbook, Routledge: New York and London, Solving the Gender Puzzle p25