

Sex and Gender in Society

THERE ARE SEVERAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SEX AND GENDER. SEX IS DEFINED AS WHAT WE ARE ASSIGNED AT BIRTH—MALE, FEMALE OR INTERSEX—WHILE GENDER REFERS TO HOW SOCIETY TELLS US TO BEHAVE AS A WOMAN OR A MAN—FEMININE OR MASCULINE.

Gender can also be how a person behaves and understands their gender in relation to others. Understanding the basics about sex and gender are very important when advocating for and providing services to every survivor, but perhaps especially the transgender community. This Technical Assistance Bulletin introduces and highlights the diversity that exists in biological sex, gender, gender expression, and gender

BIOLOGICAL SEX

Biological sex categorizes a person based on the visible genitalia they possess at birth. Most people are classified as female or male and some people are classified as *intersex*¹. People with intersex conditions may have ambiguous genitalia, a combination of both female and male genitalia, or chromosomal patterns are neither XX (female) or XY (male).

Parents of babies who are intersex are sometimes persuaded by doctors to “fix” their baby’s genitalia with surgeries so that they fit into more traditional understandings of sex/genitalia. These surgeries are largely unnecessary as health concerns associated with intersex genitalia are rare. Some parents opt for surgical intervention because our society reinforces a two-sex system where only “normal” female or male genitalia are acceptable. As medicine advances and intersex rights groups have worked hard to educate physicians, pediatricians are now moving away from genital reconstructive surgeries until the child is old enough to determine what is right for them.

The American Academy of Pediatrics released a “Consensus Statement on Management of Intersex Disorders” which discourages cosmetic surgeries for people who are born intersex.

GENDER, GENDER IDENTITY, AND

“**Gender** is the way society creates, patterns, and rewards our understandings of femininity and masculinity” (Shaw & Lee, 2012, p.105). In other words, society dictates what are considered “acceptable” behaviors, jobs, appearances, and beyond for women and men. We are taught gender from birth: girls are to act and be feminine (wear dresses, like pink, be nurturing, etc.) and boys are to act and be masculine (wear suits, like blue, be protectors, etc.). Gender is a performance of mannerisms, ideas, and behaviors that we act out daily – most often subconsciously – because it is what society has taught us to do.

Gender identity is an individual’s internal sense of their own gender and **gender expression** is how an individual outwardly expresses their gender. How we express our gender as individuals is played out through clothing, hairstyles, tattoos, voice inflection, etc. It is important to remember that both gender expression and gender expressions



PENNSYLVANIA COALITION AGAINST RAPE

125 North Enola Drive • Enola, PA 17025

717-728-9740 • 800-692-7445 • TTY 877-585-1091 • pcar.org

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SEX, GENDER, GENDER EXPRESSION, AND GENDER IDENTITY

are performances; they are something we “do” according to our personal preferences and either reinforced or condemned through society’s domination of “acceptable” norms for femininity and masculinity.

As different as sex and gender are, they share a commonality of unequal power dynamics. People who are born male and taught masculinity are given privileges over people who are born female and taught femininity. To this end, both women and men who express femininity are subject to harassment, bullying, and sexual violence. They may also be denied things like jobs or housing. This is not to say that those who express masculinity are not subject to intense harassment, bullying and sexual violence. As discussed below, transmen (women who transition to men) are targeted for their gender identity and gender expression as well as subject to sexual violence.

People who identify as transgender may or may not identify with the societal norms associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. In other words, a biological female or female-bodied person, or someone who was sexed as female at birth, feels like their gender expression is masculine (transman). And, a biological male or male-bodied person, or someone who was sexed as male at birth, feels like their gender expression is feminine (transwoman).

“Transgender is sometimes used to include people who self-identify as transsexual, intersex, two-spirit, gender-queer, drag queens, cross dressers, and others” (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2012, p. 3).

Some people who identify as transgender use hormones and/or surgery(ies) to alter their outward appearance and become

more comfortable in their bodies. Some individuals may alter some or all of their (legal) documents, such as driver’s license, health insurance, bank accounts, and many other forms of documentation.

Not all individuals who identify as transgender medically or legally transition from one gender to another. They might not live as their preferred gender full-time, because of employment discrimination, family disapproval,

or public hostility. Other transgender people may take no steps to alter their body or documentation, either because they have a fluid gender identity, lack the funds or resources to transition, or have made a

personal choice that values some other component of their life greater than the desire to change their body or outward gendered expression.

There are as many as five sexes!
For more information, read Anne Fausto-Sterling’s classic article (1993), “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough”.

A JOURNEY

Sex, gender and gender identity are not fixed into the two categories of female or male, feminine or masculine. Rather, they are continuums of biological and cultural make up. For many people who identify as transgender, the destination is what is vitally important to them. The journey can be painful and the destination may be out of reach/impossible. But for many, the goal is the destination of living in a specific gender or living in a certain gendered way.

Understanding the differences between these concepts is important in order to better serve the transgender community. The way we approach our own journey into understanding sex, gender, gender identity and gender expression helps improve our services and outreach efforts when working with the transgender community.

For more information on terminology, please see Talking About Gender & Sexuality: Sexual Violence & Individuals Who Identify as LGBTQ (NSVRC, 2012).

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NOTES

According to the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), 1 in 100 people are born intersex. For more information, please visit the ISNA's website: www.isna.org



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