
Understanding Terminology

For many people, the terms “gender” and “sex” are used interchangeably, and thus incorrectly. This idea has become so common 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.

A person’s **gender** is socially constructed. Gender refers to the set of roles, activities, expectations and behaviours assigned to females and males by society. Our society recognises two basic gender roles: masculine (having the qualities attributed to males) and feminine (having the qualities attributed to females).

Biological or anatomical **sex** refers to the physical structure of one’s reproductive organs and is used to assign sex at birth. Biological sex is determined by chromosomes (XX for females, XY for males), hormones (oestrogen/progesterone for females, testosterone for males) and internal and external genitalia.

A person’s **gender identity** refers to one’s innermost concept of self as male or female or both or neither – it is how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One’s gender identity can be the same or different to the sex assigned at birth. Individuals are conscious of this between the ages of 18 months and 3 years. Most people develop a gender identity that matches their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological or assigned sex.³ Some of these individuals choose to socially, hormonally and/or surgically, change their sex to more fully match their gender identity.

Gender expression refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice and other forms of presentation. Gender expression also works the other way as people assign gender to others based on their appearance, mannerisms, and other gendered characteristics. Sometimes, transgender people seek to match their physical expression with their gender identity, rather than their birth-assigned sex. Gender expression should not be viewed as an indication of sexual orientation.

Transgender is a term used to describe people whose birth-sex, gender identity, and gender expression do not all match. More narrowly defined, it refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match their assigned birth gender. For example, a person with a male birth-sex may identify as female, adopt a female role, and present as a girl or woman. She may be referred to as a transwoman or male-to-female transgender person. A person with female birth-sex may identify as male, adopt a male role, and present as male. He is also referred to as a transman or female-to-male transgender person. A transgender person can also have a gender identity which lies somewhere

³ Though a child is labelled male or female at birth, only his or her biological traits are apparent. As time progresses and the person grows up, he or she may become aware of a gender identity that is different from the birth-sex.

between male and female. A person can be born a man, but may feel inherently female, and feel unhappy about being classified as male. This consequently means that a transgender person's legal identification documents misrepresent the gender identity of the individual, since they reflect the gender assigned to them at birth – regardless of whether or not this is the felt experience of the individual.⁴

The disharmony between the official gender given at birth and the individual's inherent gender identity and the social stigma and discrimination that come with this incongruence, can lead to great emotional trauma. For example, when the official sex on identification documents places an individual in a role that is diametrically opposite to the individual's inherent gender identity, it can cause great discomfort and distress.

⁴ Gender Dynamics and Legal Resources Centre, *Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act No. 49 of 2003*: Briefing Paper.