

Definition: Gender

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Because *The Bearded Lady Project* directly challenges and pokes fun at the gendered stereotypes of paleontologists, it is important to define the term “gender.” Much like the term “woman,” most people may never have considered what gender is unless they have been accused of performing it incorrectly. Moreover, the definition from which we begin our work—that gender is a social construction, not biologically based—has only been developing since the mid-twentieth century. Many gender scholars and activists specifically attribute the term in its current usage to sexologist John Money’s research beginning in the 1950s.¹ Today, the breadth of language surrounding gender identity and expression is ever changing and expanding, largely via social media commentary and discussion among queer communities. Even social media behemoth Facebook introduced 50+ different gender options in February 2014—evidence that the visibility of genders beyond man/male and woman/female is evolving.²

At the same time, gender reveal parties have become more common and at times extreme. These parties celebrate the assignment of a binary gender to babies via color-coded revelations—for example, blue for boys and pink for girls—based on the interpretation of genitalia on an ultrasound. Thus, these parties conflate gender with sex assigned at birth. Many, including the inventor of such parties, have begun to question the ethics of parents celebrating, often extravagantly, the assignment of a binary gender, with all of its incumbent stereotypes, to children before children have any innate sense of self.³ The continued prevalence of these parties demonstrates, however, that many in the general public have never really thought about gender

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as a social construction or stopped to examine their own implicit assumptions about gender.

Therefore, it is important for *The Bearded Lady Project* to define our use of the word. [119]

Gender (noun): the social, historical, and cultural expectations and norms around concepts such as masculine and feminine and how these concepts affect an individual's identity.

In general, U.S. society associates femininity with women and masculinity with men. These stereotypical associations create problems because no one is either all masculine or all feminine; we are all a combination of both, and no combination is inherently good or bad. One example of how these stereotypes create problems is that the traditional society in the United States tends to accept some divergences, such as girls wearing pants and playing in the dirt, while expressing discomfort with others, such as boys wearing dresses and playing with dolls. This, of course, is also an example of a double standard. There is nothing morally or ethically wrong with girls or boys who eschew gendered stereotypes. Examples such as these, however, begin to reveal the social constructedness of gender.

Along with defining "gender" as a social construction, we acknowledge that "gender" describes how societal expectations and stereotypes interact with an individual's internal sense of gender identity, which they may or may not (be able to) express in their outward appearance or behavior. Traditional society tends to define gender as binary—either man or woman—but we recognize all genders.

- For example, "cis" and "trans" are two of the most commonly used adjectives to describe gender identity in the United States. A cis woman is a person whose gender identity

(woman or female) matches their sex assigned at birth (female). A trans woman, however, is a person whose gender identity (woman or female) does not match their sex assigned at birth (male).

- "Trans" is an umbrella term, and not all trans people are binary, meaning that they transition to "man" or "woman." Some trans people are "nonbinary," meaning that they eschew the gender binary entirely and can be both male and female, neither, or a fluid combination of the two. Additionally, these definitions can be in flux. For example, two people who identify as "genderqueer" may have different definitions of what that means. Traditional society in the United States largely forces trans people to be more conscious of the social, cultural, and historical expectations around their gender than most cis people.

Even the imagery of the gender spectrum between masculine and feminine has more recently become insufficient for describing three-dimensional [120] lived experiences, especially for trans identities. Such interactive images as "The Gender Unicorn"—which allows individuals to fill in levels of their gender identity, gender expression, sex assigned at birth, and physical and emotional attractions alongside a cartoon unicorn illustrating these concepts—have become more common in efforts to replace the language around binary genders (male and female) with more specific language.⁴ They also help to more clearly delineate gender from sexuality, which are two distinct concepts; that is, one's gender does not determine one's sexuality.

Finally, because our definitions are situated in the United States, we must acknowledge that the stereotypes of gender, like other categories of identity, are inextricably linked to conceptions of race, heterosexuality, class, colonialism, and the assimilation to Western values.

- For example, the United States and other Western cultures have historically normalized gender as binary—either male or female—and imposed a binary gender system on colonized cultures. In the United States, trans and nonbinary genders are only now beginning to enter the popular consciousness. But many other cultures around the world have long identified more than two genders. Many Native American communities, for instance, have a third and sometimes fourth gender collectively called “two-spirit people.”⁵
- Gender stereotypes are often centered in whiteness. For example, throughout U.S. history, black women have often been perceived as either too masculine or hypersexualized, outside the norms of proper (white) feminine behavior. This in turn has led to the questioning of their womanhood.⁶ And Western standards of feminine beauty have historically been centered in whiteness: long, silky hair, often blonde; pale, alabaster skin; thin bodies; and thin noses and lips. Examples abound of this idealization of (white) feminine beauty throughout the canon of Western art.
- A worldview that sees heterosexuality as the norm often insists that men be masculine and women be feminine. For example, the perception and/or expression of femininity in men—whether in behavior, gesture, or career choice—has often been perceived as a sign

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of being gay, whatever their sexuality; conversely, society often stereotypes all gay men as feminine. These associations combine homophobia with toxic masculinity to create the fear that femininity in men is a sign of both weakness and being gay. [121]

These, of course, are not the only examples of how gender intersects with other identity categories, complicating the concept of gender even further. Therefore, this essay is only a beginning on how *The Bearded Lady Project* defines gender. By necessity, these definitions are at once complicated and incomplete, because gender is always already in a process of becoming. That is, gender is performative.

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¹ "LGBTQ+ Definitions," Trans Students Educational Resources, accessed August 5, 2019, <http://www.transstudent.org/definitions/>; "Money, John, Ph.D.," Kinsey Institute, accessed August 5, 2019, <https://www.kinseyinstitute.org/about/profiles/john-money.php>.

² As of November 2019, however, there is still no published list of all the options, making it difficult to find and change your gender on the platform. Leslie Walker, "How to Edit Gender Identity Status on Facebook," *Lifewire*, September 28, 2019, <https://www.lifewire.com/edit-gender-identity-status-on-facebook-2654421>.

³ Hope, Allison. "She Invented the Gender Reveal Party. She Has Some Regrets," *Elle*, Jul. 29, 2019, <https://www.elle.com/culture/a28536376/gender-reveal-inventor-interview-jenna-karvunidis/>.

⁴ Landyn Pan and Anna Moore, "The Gender Unicorn," Trans Student Educational Resources, accessed October 2, 2019, <http://www.transstudent.org/gender/>.

⁵ The definition of "two-spirit people" is dynamic and not uniform across Native American peoples. There is also some controversy within Native American communities about two-spirit as an umbrella concept for many different gender identities. Unfortunately, the term is

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often appropriated by non-Native Americans to mean having both masculine and feminine traits. Rebecca Nagle, "The Healing History of Two-Spirit, A Term That Gives LGBTQ Natives A Voice," *The Huffington Post*, accessed September 30, 2019,

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/two-spirit-identity_n_5b37cfbce4b007aa2f809af1; Mary Anne Pember, "'Two Spirit' Tradition Far From Ubiquitous Among Tribes," *Rewire News*, accessed September 30, 2019, <https://rewire.news/article/2016/10/13/two-spirit-tradition-far-ubiquitous-among-tribes/>.

⁶ Recent examples include the media scrutiny of the perceived masculinity and/or sexualization of black women athletes Caster Semenya and Serena Williams: the former went through several bouts of biologically invasive sex verification testing, and the latter's body and dress are under constant surveillance by tennis authorities, fans, and the general public. See Anna North, "'I am a Woman and I am Fast': What Caster Semenya's Story Says About Gender and Race in Sports," *Vox*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/5/3/18526723/caster-semenya-800-gender-race-intersex-athletes>.