

Definition: Woman

Amy K. Guenther

Why even define "woman"?

It may seem unnecessary. Many people have never questioned and/or thought about what a woman is unless they or someone near them have had their identity as a woman questioned or been called a woman when they are not. Hegemonic society assumes a woman is a female with a vagina who menstruates once a month; can bear children; and can be a mother, wife, daughter, sister, or, more recently, a scientist, CEO, or even president. This implicit understanding of "woman" is encountered every day and has been used to organize many societal systems, from medicine to education. Yet "woman" is not so easily defined. The problem with relying on an unexamined conceptualization of "woman" is that it often tends to exclude those on the edges of what hegemonic society defines as "woman."

Indeed, for centuries feminists have questioned, critiqued, and redefined what it means to be a woman: from English writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft's examination of women in her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; to abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman?" addressing racism in the women's suffrage movement; to French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's now famous statement that, "one is not born but, rather, becomes a woman," in her 1949 *The Second Sex*; to legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's coining of the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to describe the interlocking oppressions of being black and a woman;¹ to trans women in the twenty-first century claiming their space as women.² These examples demonstrate that there is no one singular definition or experience of "woman."

Guenther, Amy K. "Definition: Woman" in *The Bearded Lady Project: Challenging the Face of Science*, edited by Lexi Jamieson Marsh and Ellen Currano, 81-85. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

Even today, we as a society continue to struggle with how to define *woman*. Both the *Oxford Dictionaries* and *Collins English Dictionary* [82] have recently faced controversies over what many perceive as sexist language associations and trans-exclusionary definitions of "woman."³ While the publishers argue that dictionaries reflect words in their common usage, which is not necessarily how scholars or activists might define them, dictionary definitions of sex and gender terms do have real world consequences.⁴ Moreover, as the renewed controversy around Olympic champion Caster Semenya also reveals, the International Olympic Committee and the International Association of Athletics Federation have a long, problematic history of using medical testing to determine if a woman athlete meets certain biological standards of being female and thus eligible to compete in women's athletics.⁵ In Semenya's case and those of many other women of color outside of sports, the definition of "woman" also has much to do with race and racism.⁶ So when a definition of woman is left unexamined, hegemonic society still privileges and implicitly assumes "woman" to be biologically female, cis, white, and heterosexual. Therefore, in (re)examining definitions of "woman," *The Bearded Lady Project* attempts to define "woman" as broadly and inclusively as possible.

Woman (*noun and an apposite noun*)

We use the term "woman" as a type of gender category. Therefore, it is socially, historically, and culturally constructed. As such, "woman" has meant different things in different times and places. As a gender category, "woman" exists on a spectrum of masculinity and femininity, which are also socially constructed categories. "Woman" is not synonymous with "feminine" or "femininity." Likewise, masculinity is not antithetical to "woman." Many in the public use "woman" interchangeably with "female," but gender scholars and activists tend to reserve "female" for biological sex rather than gender categories.

Guenther, Amy K. "Definition: Woman" in *The Bearded Lady Project: Challenging the Face of Science*, edited by Lexi Jamieson Marsh and Ellen Currano, 81-85. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

We also use the term "woman" intersectionally, meaning that no experience of womanhood is ever singular or universal; all women must negotiate their positionality in regards to race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ability, and/or nationality. Perhaps the most readily available example of the intersectionality of (at least) gender and race is the gender pay gap, wherein for every dollar a man earned in 2017, a woman earned 80 cents. Broken down further, however, for every dollar a white man earned, Latinas earned 53 cents, Native American and Alaska Native women earned 58 cents, black women earned 61 cents, white women earned 77 cents, and Asian women earned 85 cents. Yet even these categories can be further broken down and complicated by factors such as sexuality, motherhood, disability, and age, among others.⁷

We acknowledge that the term "woman" is often used in medical and [83] scientific research and public discourse to denote the biological sex of people born with what are generally understood as female reproductive organs (vagina, ovaries, no Y chromosome, etc.); however we problematize this definition as inadequate and exclusionary.

- It does not fully encompass the existence of intersex women (people who possess male and female chromosomes, hormones, genital, and/or sex organs and tissues), trans women, and cis women with elevated androgens (male hormones).
- A biological definition also incorrectly includes people with female reproductive organs that are not women. We understand that not all women have vaginas, not all people with vaginas are women.

- Additionally, it brings into question the “womanhood” of cis women who never menstruate, never become pregnant, have had a double mastectomy, and/or have had a hysterectomy. If being a woman is based solely on biology, an argument often made by both the far right and the more liberal trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), then does changing these biological markers change a cis woman’s identity as a woman?
- Moreover, biological definitions have been dangerously aligned if not used as outright justifications for invasive medical surveillance of, and violence against women of color and women deemed “sexually deviant.”⁸ For example, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientists and doctors frequently studied (often enslaved) black women’s genitalia and bodies, with questionable levels of consent, for anatomical anomalies to explain what the doctors’ perceived as heightened sexuality and to justify biological differentiation between races.⁹ Forced sterilizations have also been overwhelmingly carried out against women of color in the U.S. in a messy confluence of racism, misogyny, ableism, and classism. Such an extreme biological alteration is meant as both a form of eugenics and a means of curbing so-called deviant behaviors that exceed hegemonic gender and sexuality norms.¹⁰

Biological definitions are still being used to justify discrimination against women (when “woman” is meant as female assigned at birth). As recently as 2018, CERN scientist Professor Alessandro Strumia, a member of one of the most well-known scientific organizations in the world, gave a talk on gender and physics where he suggested that men’s brains are better suited to physics than women’s.¹¹ [84]

Guenther, Amy K. "Definition: Woman" in *The Bearded Lady Project: Challenging the Face of Science*, edited by Lexi Jamieson Marsh and Ellen Currano, 81-85. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

For all of these reasons, "woman" is a term inadequate to capture the complexities of gender identity when it is simply juxtaposed against the dichotomous term "man"; however, it is still the best term we have (right now) to describe and study gender inequities in society and the sciences until researchers widen the gender demographics studied.

We admit that by necessity our definition is incomplete and ongoing.¹²

Amy K. Guenther is a freelance scholar, dramaturg, and teacher in Austin, Texas. She has a Ph.D. in theatre history, literature, and criticism with an emphasis in performance as public practice from The University of Texas at Austin.

¹ While certainly not the first to articulate such interlocking oppressions, she was the first to use the term "intersectionality" to describe it. Today intersectionality is used more colloquially to mean the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class, and other factors. "Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later," Columbia Law School, June 8, 2017, <https://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>.

² This is not to say that trans people have not always existed but to observe that, more and more, language is being created to articulate their experiences in this century as trans rights also gain more and more visibility in public discourse. The inclusion of trans women has been one of the primary arguments in redefining "woman" in the twenty-first century. For a brief history, see Carol Hay, "Who Counts as a Woman?," *The New York Times*, Apr. 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/opinion/trans-women-feminism.html>.

³ Nora Caplan-Bricker, "Is It Time to Change the Definition of 'Woman'?", *Slate*, Sep. 29, 2017, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/09/why-a-controversial-definition-of-the-word-woman-doesnt-necessarily-mean-the-dictionary-is-sexist.html>; Allison Flood, "Sexism Row Prompts Oxford Dictionaries to Review Language Used in Definitions," *The Guardian*, Jan. 25, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/25/oxford-dictionary-review-sexist-language-rabid-feminist-gender>; Kathryn Madden, "The Dictionary Definition of 'Woman'

Needs to Change," *Marie Claire*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.marieclaire.com.au/dictionary-sexism-woman>.

⁴ Caplan-Bricker cites three cases that use dictionary definitions and common usage arguments to decide court cases: *Chambers v. Ormiston* 2007 in the Rhode Island Supreme Court and *re Estate of Gardiner* 2002 in the Kansas Supreme Court, which was then used in *re Application for Marriage License for Nash* 2003 in an Ohio Court of Appeals. Caplan-Bricker, "Is It Time."

⁵ Tellingly, sex verification testing is not done for men's athletics. Michelle Garcia, "Our Cover Star, Caster Semenya: The Athlete in the Fight for Her Life," *Out*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.out.com/sports/2019/7/23/our-cover-star-caster-semenya-athlete-fight-her-life>.

⁶ 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>. Also see germinal works in women of color feminisms such as, Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd ed. (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983); Combahee River Collective, "Combahee River Collective Statement" in *Home Girls: A Black [85] Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983): 264-74; and bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

⁷ Kevin Miller, Deborah J. Vagins, et. al, *The Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap* (Washington, DC: American Association of University Women, 2018), 9-18, https://www.aauw.org/aauw_check/pdf_download/show_pdf.php?file=The_Simple_Truth.

⁸ Perceived sex variations also have a history of being used to explain the existence of lesbians. Jennifer Terry, "Lesbians under the Medical Gaze: Scientists Search for Remarkable Differences," *The Journal of Sex Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 317-39.

⁹ Siobhan Somerville, "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (1994): 243-266.

¹⁰ Lisa Ko, "Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States," *Independent Lens*, Jan. 16, 2019, <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>.

¹¹ Pallab Ghosh, "Cern Scientist: 'Physics Built by Men—Not by Invitation'" *BBC News*, Oct. 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45703700>; Rafi Letzter, "A Physicist Said Women's Brains Make Them Worse at Physics—Experts Say That's 'Laughable,'" *LiveScience*, Oct. 2, 2018, <https://www.livescience.com/63730-physicist-says-women-bad-at-physics.html>.

¹² While writing this essay, we came across the concept of womxn but have chosen not to include it for several reasons. "Womxn" is a relatively recent term and, as such, there is still much disagreement on what it means and whom it excludes and includes. Many use the term to specifically include trans women (and some nonbinary people) and women of color as womxn. Both trans women and women of color have contentious histories of inclusion in the category of woman, as discussed in this essay. Most pertinent to our uses, however, is the fact that womxn is extremely controversial in the trans community partially because it tends to exclude trans women (and by extension women of color) from the category of woman, thus reifying the term "woman" to always implicitly mean white and cis. This is by no means a universal understanding of womxn, however, and it is increasingly being used on U.S. college campuses. For further reading: Breena Kerr, "What do Women Want?", *The New York Times*, Mar. 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/style/womxn.html?searchResultPosition=1>; Alex Regan, "Should Women Be Spelt Womxn?", BBC News, 10 Oct. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-45810709>; Luna Merbruja, "3 Common Feminist Phrases That (Unintentionally) Marginalize Trans Women," *Everyday Feminism*, May 12, 2015, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/05/feminist-phrases-marginalize-trans-women/>; Asia Key, "Woman, Womyn, Womxn: Students Learn about Intersectionality in Womanhood," *The Standard* (Missouri State University), March 27, 2017, http://www.the-standard.org/news/woman-womyn-womxn-students-learn-about-intersectionality-in-womanhood/article_c6644a10-1351-11e7-914d-3f1208464c1e.html.