

YP the yp foundation
feminist · intersectional · rights-based

UNDERSTANDING GENDER BEYOND THE BINARIES



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ABOUT THE YP FOUNDATION

The YP Foundation (TYPF) is a youth-led and focused organisation that facilitates young people's feminist and rights-based leadership on issues of health equity, gender justice, sexuality rights, and social justice. TYPF ensures that young people have the information, capacity, and opportunities to inform and lead the development and implementation of programmes and policies that impact their lives and are recognised as skilled and aware leaders of social change.

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UNDERSTANDING GENDER BEYOND THE BINARIES

Did you recently come across terms like transgender, cisgender, gender non-binary, gender queer and were left scratching your head thinking, "yeh kya hai?" Did you accidentally use the wrong pronouns for someone and want to learn more about them?

In this booklet, we will attempt to have conversations on some of these issues. While the book is in no way a complete guide to understanding everything about gender beyond the binaries, it may open up some pathways for us. But in order to understand gender beyond the binaries, let us rewind a little and refresh our memories about what 'gender' actually is.

Do you remember when you first heard the word 'gender' while growing up? I remember reading it in the grammar textbook. If your experience has been similar to mine, as a child, gender would have meant a category of nouns, categorised into masculine, feminine, common, and neuter. While common gender nouns include those which denote neither male or female, like parent, teacher, child, etc. neuter gender nouns include inanimate objects like table, hair, etc.

It was only much later in life when I read some basic sociology textbooks, that I learned that gender refers to 'man and woman'. But most often when someone asks us to mention our gender, the options given to us are 'male and female'.



UNDERSTANDING SEX

However, the big question that remains is, "After all, WHAT IS GENDER?"

Is gender 'male and female'? Is it 'man and woman'? Is gender the same as sex? If they are not the same, how are they different?

While sex and gender are closely connected, they are not the same. We will come to that in some time. But before we move forward, let us quickly brush up on the things that we may already know.

Sex is how our bodies are physically or biologically made up. On the basis of our biological makeup, most living beings are labelled or assigned as male and female at the time of their birth. When children are born, the first question that is often asked about them is, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Now, how does the doctor know if a baby is a boy or a girl? The doctor usually looks at the genitals of the baby and declares whether it is a boy or a girl. If the baby has a penis it is declared a boy and if it has a vulva and vagina it is declared a girl. Apart from the genitals, it is extremely tough to differentiate between two newborn children.



So, is sex equal to genitals? Are there other factors in our body that make up our sex?

Apart from our genitals, there are several other aspects of our biology which determine the sex of a living being including us humans.

Some of these aspects are:

1. Chromosomes - XX, XY
2. Genitals - Penis, vulva, and vagina
3. Gonads - Testes and ovaries
4. Gametes - Sperms and ova
5. Hormones - Testosterone, oestrogen, progesterone
6. Secondary sex characteristics - Facial hair, fat distribution, voice

Our sex is a combination of all these different physical traits.

Society often tells us that:



Which means that an ideal male body needs to have all the characteristics listed in the blue box and some more, while an ideal female body needs to have those enlisted in the pink box.

However, if we look at the list more carefully, most of these things are not visible to us and even fewer of these characteristics are visible at the time of birth. It is only the genitals that are visible externally when a child is born. Hence on the basis of genitals, human children are labelled or assigned as 'male' or 'female'. And once they are assigned a label, the world starts making different norms for them.

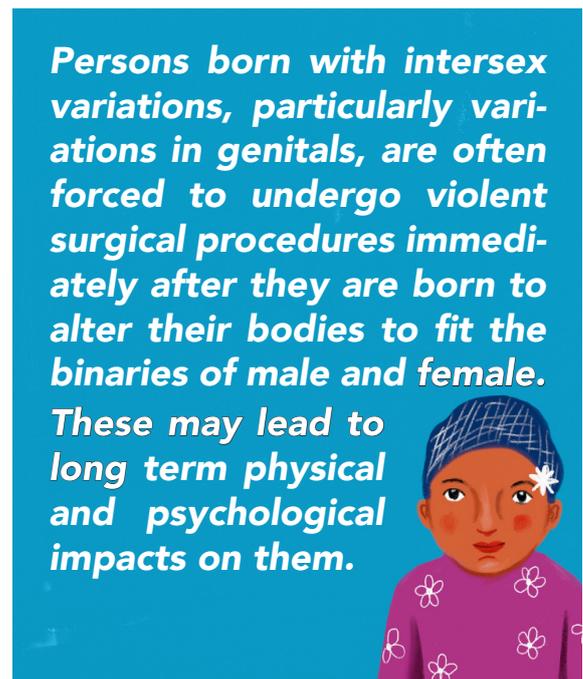
Have you ever wondered what the world would look like if we were divided on the basis of some other physical characteristic?

However, nature is not a factory. All human beings are not created with a cut and paste formula. Hence, it is impossible to categorise all human beings neatly into two boxes. There are quite a few people who are born with characteristics which do not fall into either box.

Sometimes these variations in our biological characteristics become visible at birth. Sometimes these variations may become visible during puberty. However, many of these variations never become visible to us unless we undergo medical tests. Hence a lot of people live their entire lives without even knowing that such variation exists in their bodies.

Sometimes, in certain people, if the variations become visible during birth or later in life, doctors categorise them as **intersex**.

But you may ask, "Arre! But aren't intersex people those who are born with both male and female sexual characteristics? Why are we making it so complicated?" Pause! **The fact is that human bodies are complicated.**



Intersex is an umbrella category for people who live with variations in their biological traits that cannot be labelled strictly as male or female. **Intersex is not a homogeneous category. There are many different ways in which the variations in biology occur.** Sometimes people are born with genitals that fall outside the category of male and female, such as 'ambiguous' genitalia, enlarged clitoris, clinically designated 'micro-penis', and undescended testes, to name a few. If a person's genitals look different at the time of birth, the doctors may label them as intersex right then or try to surgically change them to conform to the binary sexes. At times, parents leave such babies in hospitals, religious places, or on the streets. These babies are then adopted by communities of people who do not conform to society's ideas of sex and gender. This will be discussed again later.



Other intersex variations include when the person is born with both ovarian and testicular tissue or has both a penis as well as an underdeveloped uterus.

Sometimes these variations may be noticed in people's chromosomes. A child may be born with XXY, XXYY, XO (O indicates a missing sex chromosome), XXX, XYY, X, XXXY, XXXXY chromosome variations. This list is ever expanding as new scientific research keeps showing more variations. Intersex variation could also be a lack of development of secondary sexual characteristics.

This list is barely exhaustive as newer types of variations are discovered frequently with newer research being conducted on the topic. **Hence, instead of calling people living with biological variation as intersex persons, the more appropriate term is persons with intersex variation.** Additionally, while such people may have certain different needs because of their intersex conditions, it may be just one aspect of their personhood and identity.

There are several statistics regarding the number of persons who are born with intersex variations. Many sources cite that intersex variations may exist in an estimate of about 1 in 1,500 or 1 in 2,000 live births.

Anne Fausto-Sterling, suggested that as many as 1.7% people are born with intersex variations which suggests that 1 in 60 births might be intersex. Several of these conditions do not appear until much later or even throughout their lives unless people undergo medical examinations. 1.7% is an average from a wide variety of populations, but it is not uniform across the world and may be justifiable as an upper limit number. Anne Fausto-Sterling also suggests that **in human beings, diversity occurs in all levels of biology - chromosomal makeup, hormonal sensitivity, genitals, brain chemistry, and structure**. She points out the challenge and impossibility of categorising sex and looks at it as a spectrum.

How often do you look at a person and assume their sex as well as gender? But, as we have seen, if we are in a room with 100 people, we would have made a wrong assumption about at least 1-2 people.

While the statistics may vary from research to research, the fact remains that people who are born with such variations are more common than we imagine them to be.

Apart from this, all of us know of people who are assigned female at birth but do not show breast development. There are people who are assigned as male who show breast development. We know of people who are assigned female at birth and have a lot of facial hair. Similarly, there are people who are assigned male at birth but do not develop any facial hair. Many times, these are labelled as pathological conditions or diseases and disorders. This is done so as to ensure that the artificial binary of labelling everyone as male and female that is created by society is maintained.

Now, it is okay to not understand the science behind the complexities of the human body. It is more important to understand how it impacts us and people around us and what we can do about it.

Today, even as we have more knowledge about variations in bodies, there is also heightened violent and invasive scrutiny of bodies that do not fit into binary norms. The scrutiny has been recently witnessed in spaces such as security checks and in sports and professions which mandate physical examinations. Athletes like Dutee Chand and Santhi Soundarajan in the Indian context have had to face the brunt of it. In 2021, the popular Bollywood film *Rashmi Rocket* explored this issue.

Sometimes, some people also undergo medical procedures to change biological aspects, including removing facial or body hair, enhancing or reconstructing the chest area, enhancing or blocking some hormones, and reconstruction of genitalia. People undergo procedures to affirm their gender in various ways.



Interestingly enough, sex testing is not a norm in men's sports. Could it be an indication of sexism in sport and yet another attempt to police the bodies of women?

A report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) showed that World Athletics, a global sports-governing body, **targetted women from Latin and South America, Africa, and Asia for "abusive sex testing" due to racially informed definitions of femininity.**

In another context, Adam Harry, a transgender pilot from India was declared "unfit to fly" by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) due to having undergone hormone therapy. Later, after the issue gained much public attention, the DGCA changed its guidelines to allow trans pilots to fly if they reach a stable hormone dose.

Thus, if we look at the different biological aspects that constitute or make up sex, it often becomes a challenge to categorise people into two strict boxes. Even though it is not uncommon to be born with variation, we continue to force people into two boxes of male and female.

To reiterate what was discussed earlier, sex is the categorisation by society of living beings, including humans, into male and female depending upon certain aspects of their biology. **When it becomes impossible to categorise them as male and female, they are put into the category of intersex variations who are then seen as problems or defects that need to be corrected or outcasted.**

This categorisation of human beings into two separate boxes at the time of their birth, based on only one physical characteristic itself can lead to violence on many kinds of persons. It leads to controlling and policing of all kinds of bodies. While persons with intersex variations and those who do not fit into the gender binary may receive the first lash, we have also seen that people who are on the margins of race may be on the receiving end.



UNDERSTANDING GENDER

Now that we are clear on what sex is, let's move towards understanding gender and how it is connected to sex. Depending upon the sex that we were assigned at birth, we are categorised into two genders - man and woman.



Once people are categorised as men and women, these categories continue to be reinforced with the help of several norms, characteristics, and roles throughout our lives.

If we are assigned female, we are expected to identify as a woman all our lives, behave as feminine, and follow all the roles that are imposed upon us as women. Similarly, if we are assigned male, we are expected to identify as a man all our lives, act masculine, and follow the roles that are imposed upon us as men.

Thus, gender is a system constructed by societies or cultures which classifies people as man or woman based on their biological characteristics and associates certain norms of behaviour, attitude, feelings, roles, and expressions to it.

Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher, wrote that gender is performative. Gender is not who we are but what we do. It means that gender is a set of our behaviours and expressions. All of us operate within a set of ideas and grow up with some knowledge about what it means to be a man or a woman. These ideas are taken on by us and we keep repeating them again and again so that they become norms.

The norms on the basis of which gender is formed or constructed include norms of expression, attribute, role, and identity. These norms are made in such a way that men and women are seen as exact opposites of each other.



Norms of gender expression include ways in which one is expected to express themselves because of their gender. This includes how one dresses up, how one behaves, what one is supposed to do with the hair on their body, and more. For example, depending upon the culture that we are part of, a woman is supposed to wear clothes such as sarees or skirts, have little to no hair on their body, and grow the hair on their heads. Women are also supposed to walk slowly and talk softly. On the other hand, men are supposed to wear pants and shirts, they are supposed to grow out their facial hair, and cut the hair on their head short. Men are supposed to walk fast, take heavy steps, and talk loudly.

Norms of gender attributes are the qualities that are associated with masculinity and femininity. For example, a woman is expected to be feminine. The attributes or characteristics associated with femininity include soft, caring, nurturing, dependent, submissive, and emotional to name a few. On the other hand, men are supposed to be masculine. The attributes or characteristics associated with masculinity include everything opposite to femininity, such as tough, carefree, risk taking, dependable, aggressive, and emotionless.

Norms of gender roles include the kind of work that one is supposed to do. Women are expected to cook food, clean the house, take care of children and the elderly, among other things. Men are expected to earn money for the family and protect the women, children, and elderly. Gender roles also include rules and regulations which are imposed on people because of their gender. For instance, women are not supposed to go outside at night, girls are supposed to play indoor games and with dolls, women are not supposed to have sexual desires, etc. Men are supposed to enjoy outdoor sports, boys are supposed to play with toy cars, they are supposed to express sexual desires, they are not supposed to cry, they are supposed to control and protect the women and children in their life, etc.

These norms of gender roles also extend to how the economy operates. **Even when women go out to work, their work is seen as an extension of their care work at home and their income is seen as an additional income.** In the agricultural sector, they are mostly engaged with sowing the seeds, removing the weeds, and cutting the crop. At the construction site, they are engaged in carrying the raw material. In the service sector too, their work is an extension of the care work they are supposed to do. Hence the ideal jobs for women are those of a nurse and primary school teacher.

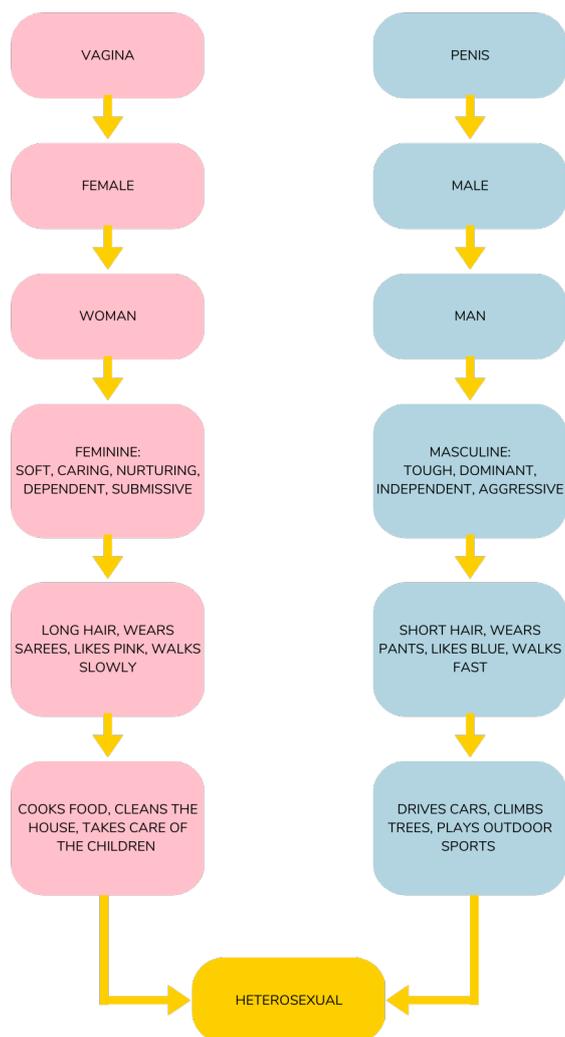
On the other hand, men are supposed to work outside the house, climb trees, drive vehicles, work with machines, and be breadwinners of the household. Hence, in the field, men own and use machines like tractors and ploughs to till the land. They lay the bricks and build houses in the construction sites and in the service sector they are supposed to become doctors, engineers, and scientists. It is as a result of this division which looks at women's work as an extension of their care work. Therefore, the kinds of work that women are engaged in are seen as less skilled and are therefore also less paid.

The ideas of gender are formed within a set of power relationships, including caste, class, race and religion amongst others. These power relationships don't operate in only one direction. While patriarchy often gives more power to men, not all men have more power than women. As we move forward, we will look at how these power relationships operate.

Norms of gender identity demand that throughout their lives people continue to identify with the gender they were assigned at the time of their birth.

Gender norms also define who one is supposed to be attracted to and be in a sexual and romantic relationship with, which is also known as the sexual orientation of a person. Hence, if one is assigned male at birth and identifies as a man, one is expected to be attracted to someone who is assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman. This expectation is also known as **heterosexuality**. This expectation is extended to the idea that the only fitting relationship between these two people is one which ends in marriage and reproduction. Imposition of gender norms take place along with the imposition of heterosexuality.

Hence,



This whole set of norms which get applied in a linear fashion can be called **heteronormativity**.

UNDERSTANDING HETERONORMATIVITY

Heteronormativity is the ideology and practice that believes that biological sex, gender identity, gender roles and sexuality must all be in alignment.

Heteronormativity assumes that the only form of attraction is between man and woman, who fit into the conventions of gender roles and norms. Any other kind of expression, identity, attraction, or desire that does not fall in these boxes is seen as less normal or natural and sometimes seen as completely abnormal or unnatural.

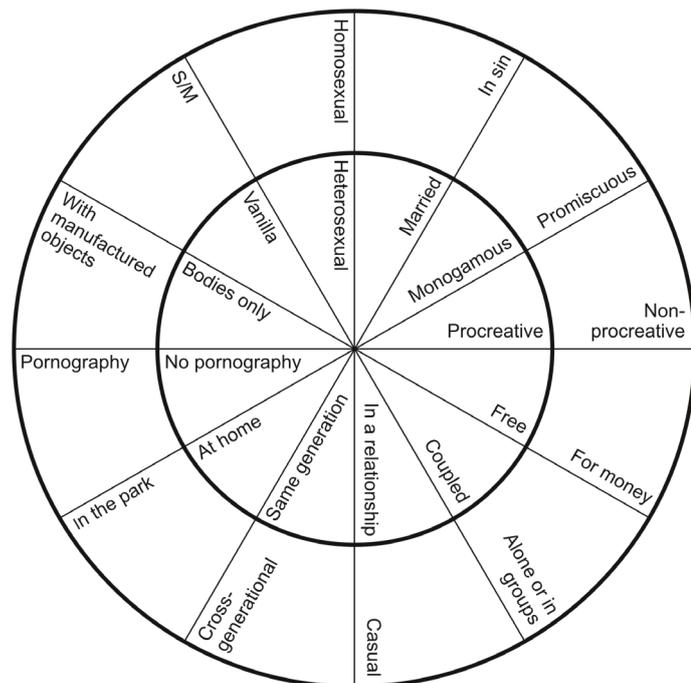


The term heteronormativity was made popular by **Michael Warner** around 1991. But before that there were theorists like **Gayle Rubin** who wrote about the **sex/gender system**, **Adrienne Rich** who wrote about the notion of **compulsory heterosexuality**, and **Monique Wittig** who wrote about **the straight mind**. These and several other theories contributed to the formulation of the idea of heteronormativity.

Both Wittig and Rich were however criticised for suggesting that there are only two responses to the system, either total conformity or radical revolution. Thus, they overlooked the negotiations that may lie in between which allowed for bringing about change in the system.

Gayle Rubin's **Charmed Circle** provides a background to understanding to how certain kinds of sexual relationships informed by age, nature of sexual transaction, marital status, use of objects, etc. are treated as 'good, normal, natural, blessed' and other sex is treated as 'bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned'.

Why don't we try to recreate the Charmed Circle in our own context, by including other identities of caste, race, ethnicity, class, ability, among others?



Gayle Rubin said that "Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes." She wrote that gender is created within the patriarchal kinship system through the exchange of women by men. She further wrote that people who are biologically female are only gendered into becoming women when there is a distinction made between the male as a gift giver and the female as a gift. Rubin also gave the idea of a Charmed Circle, which is a diagram resembling a hierarchy of the types of sex, in which only certain types of sex are acceptable and others are treated as bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned. The idea of what is considered acceptable and what is considered abnormal and unacceptable keeps shifting according to context. Hence,

according to Rubin, it is more important to focus on looking at how partners treat each other.



Heteronormativity is an important concept because it not only affects people who are not heterosexual but it also affects everyone else who is trying to push any norm of gender or attraction. For example, have you ever wondered why can't a woman make the first move to express her desire if she likes a man? The answer is: because in this heteronormative system, the norms of gender dictate that a woman should be shy. Even after a man approaches her, she is expected to reject his advances because the norms dictate that she is not supposed to have desires. After all, isn't "hasee toh phasee" one of the biggest morals of every Bollywood story? On the other hand, it is assumed that a man can never reject any advances because that would make him less manly. The implications of heteronormativity in everyone's lives are multiple.

The process of forcing people into the two boxes of gender begins from the day a child is born and assigned a sex. The child is made to wear clothes, shoes, and hair styles which are associated with their gender. Girls are given dolls and boys are given toy cars and guns. As children grow older, society finds countless other ways to fit them into these boxes and ensure that they are forced to remain inside them.

Apart from clothes, shoes, roles, and jobs, the spread of capitalism has ensured that food items, soaps, and stationery are all segregated by gender. Why does the chocolate we give the girl child have to be pink and the boy be blue?

Furthermore, because everyone is assumed to be heterosexual and sex outside of marriage is seen as a big taboo in many of our societies, spaces such as hostels, toilets, and checkpoints also are divided into the binary genders, which are completely determined by people's external anatomy.

These segregations are done on the basis of the assumption that sexual intimacy is possible only between people who are of opposite sex and gender. It is also assumed that violence, especially sexual violence, can only take place between men and women, where the man is the aggressor and the woman the victim. This does not acknowledge that **sexual violence is an assertion of power rather than of attraction and desire**. It also does not recognise other axes of power which can lead to violence. For example, it does not acknowledge the sexual violence faced by gender non-conforming persons, irrespective of gender identity, who are forced to inhabit male spaces due to the sex that they were assigned at birth. It also does not recognise the sexual nature of violence that takes place in campus settings, such as the ritual of ragging in hostels, where seniors engage with juniors in non-consensual sexual acts in the name of fun and bonding. It often erases the sexual violence perpetrated by military personnel on civilians (across gender) of the regions which they occupy. It completely erases away the countless incidents of sexual violence and rape that takes place on marginalised persons (across genders) during riots.

Adrienne Rich argued that women are coerced into heterosexuality and patriarchal gender relationships. She pointed out that there were privileges associated with conforming to heterosexuality and punishments for moving away from it, which meant that maintaining heterosexuality involved a lot of hard work. She said that it is important to resist heterosexuality in order to resist patriarchy. She was, however, criticised for suggesting that all man-woman relationships are coerced and failing to look at how heterosexuality oppresses everyone.



As a result of the gender segregation which is strictly based on a person's assumed biology, on one hand men and women are not taught to respect or understand how to live with each other, thereby breeding toxic and violent masculinity; on the other hand, people who do not fit into the gender binaries are further marginalised and pushed away from society. Even as society wants all of us to fit into these neat boxes, some of us do end up transgressing these gender norms at different points in our lives. While some transgressions may be celebrated and some transgressions are tolerated, most transgressions are met with severe punishments. **The norms as well as the attitude towards transgressions of norms are often fluid and change according to contexts.**

Monique Wittig wrote that the idea of heterosexuality was so embedded into our culture that it is interwoven into everything we do, speak, feel, or think. Heterosexuality is seen as obligatory. It is only non-heterosexuals who are made to question themselves and why they are the way they are. According to Wittig, sex and gender are linked so closely that being a woman only makes sense in a heterosexual context. Therefore, lesbians are not women.



For example, women working in the professional sector may often be celebrated, especially if they are supplementing the household income as well as balancing their domestic duties as wife and mother. However, it may not be so acceptable for them to earn more than their husband. A woman would also have to face criticism if she is unable to fulfil the domestic duties assigned to her.

Another example may be “men who like cooking”. While cooking is normatively seen as a woman’s job, most professional chefs across the world are men. Hence, when cooking is for domestic and unpaid labour, it is seen as the woman’s role. But when it is seen as a source of income, it becomes the domain of men. When men cook in the domestic domain, they are sometimes celebrated for being supportive husbands and at other times, they are mocked for being feminine.

When it comes to gender expression, men are often policed more than women. Women with short hair or someone who wears pants is sometimes accepted. However, men who wear sarees or who like to wear make-up are often punished severely in most contexts.

I WANT TO BE A STAY-AT HOME DAD

I WANT TO OPEN MY OWN DANCE SCHOOL



CONNECTION BETWEEN HETERONORMATIVITY AND PATRIARCHY

But who made these rules of gender? Why does everyone follow them?

As mentioned earlier, power is complex and does not operate in one direction. It operates in multiple ways. Hence these rules of gender are also not made by one person or community. Different systems of power have come together to make these rules.

One such system already discussed is heteronormativity. Heteronormativity pushes people to be in these two boxes. However, heteronormativity works very closely with another system of power, patriarchy.

Heteronormativity and patriarchy sustain each other and one cannot sustain without the other. **Patriarchy is a system of power in which people who are assigned male at birth enjoy more power and privilege in society.** However, patriarchy is designed in such a way that this system gives more power to people who are assigned male with the condition that they fulfil the characteristics in the box that corresponds with 'man'.

Several feminist philosophers have written on patriarchy. There are also multiple theories on the origin of patriarchy and how it gets manifested in society and our lives. Prominent among them include **Gerda Lerner's** *The Creation of Patriarchy* and **Friedrich Engels's** *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

If you want to read more about the basics of patriarchy, you can look up **Kamla Bhasin's** book *What is Patriarchy*, published by Kali for Women.

In the book, Bhasin writes, "The word 'patriarchy' literally means the rule of the father or the patriarch. It was originally used to describe a specific type of male dominated family - the large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children, slaves, and domestic servants all under the rule of this dominant male. Now it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways."

Heteronormativity and patriarchy operate together to make sure that everyone stays inside the boxes that were created for us and those who live up to all the norms of being a man enjoy the highest amount of power. Which means that the 'ideal male' who identifies as a man, who adheres to the norms of expressions, attributes, and roles given to him as a man, and is also attracted to women holds the maximum power in society. The more this man tries to shift outside the box, the lesser his power becomes. Hence if he is not attracted to women, his power slightly decreases. If he doesn't adhere to the norms of gender expression as a man, his power further decreases, and so on. Thus emerges **heteronormative patriarchy**.

Other power structures also work alongside patriarchy and heterosexuality to give or take away power from the boxes. These power structures also change the norms of gender and heteronormativity in different contexts.

Similarly, capitalism and patriarchy come together to give rise to **capitalist patriarchy**. Capitalism demands women across classes come out and join the labour force. However, patriarchy and heteronormativity demand that their roles in the domestic sphere do not change. If the woman is able to balance her feminine gender roles alongside her role in the labour force, she is often celebrated. Hence, the working woman has to overcompensate as a mother and wife to constantly prove to society that she has the right to be in the professional sphere, whereas the pressure is not the same for men. This is also called the **sexual division of labour** which leads to the **double burden** that women face. Women's jobs are also often seen as an extension of their caregiving work, or are considered less skilled'. Hence they are mostly underpaid. Women being underpaid is often justified because their income is not considered the primary income of the families. On the other hand, men are mocked if they are unable to 'provide' for the family. Sometimes when women step out to work, their domestic work is usually taken over by another woman, either within the family or by a hired domestic worker. All of these scenarios create multiple forms of vulnerabilities for women. While the woman who has stepped out for work is constantly pressured to also fulfill her domestic duties, the woman who continues to do domestic work may be devoid of any financial independence and often comes to the workplace without any rights.



Caste and patriarchy work very closely in the South Asian context and more specifically in the context of India and Nepal to give rise to **Brahminical patriarchy**. For instance, while lower caste women's bodies have been historically sexualised and oppressor caste men have sexually exploited oppressed caste women, upper caste women have to be 'protected' from men who are from oppressed castes. Even consensual sexual and romantic relationships between women of oppressor castes and men of oppressed castes have been severely punished through honour killings. Hence, **Dr. BR Ambedkar** spoke about how **caste endogamy** or the practice of marrying within a caste group become the basis of maintaining the caste 'purity', thereby controlling and regulating women's sexuality. Taking forward the idea, **Dr. Uma Chakravarty** wrote about how **control of women's sexuality allows the control of land and property**, an economic resource, by certain caste groups.

These are only examples of how different systems work together in such a way that while people are encouraged to transgress certain norms, other norms are created to ensure that the overall system of power does not change. I am sure all of us can think of many more examples in which these different systems of power come together in violent ways to maintain the status quo.

Similarly, other institutions of power like race, religion, ableism, etc. come together to change these norms in such a way that the overall relations of power do not get disbalanced. People live their lives in the crossroads of many of these institutions of power. For example, one may be a woman who is marginalised by her gender but she may enjoy certain benefits or privileges because she belongs to the oppressor class or caste or a majoritarian religion. A man may enjoy certain privileges because of his gender but he will lose many of these privileges if he comes out as gay. This system where different powerful institutions come together in complex ways to make sure that people enjoy certain benefits and privileges because of some of their identities and lose out certain other benefits because of other identities is called **intersectionality**. The term was coined by **Kimberle Crenshaw** who built on the ideas of black feminist thought.

While it is popularly believed that intersectionality works through a process of addition and subtraction, Crenshaw had pointed out that it is not so. Intersectionality is not a mere addition of points for all the identities that benefit us and a subtraction of points for the identities that marginalise us. Rather, these different identities interact in different ways to put us in different positions in the system of power. These positions also keep changing, taking on different forms and nuances depending upon the context.

According to a person's position within the system of power, one can be allowed to transgress certain norms. This system of power is maintained through rewards and punishments. There are rewards and privileges for conforming to the system and there are punishments for transgressions. If someone follows the norms of the system and obeys them, they receive rewards and if someone toes the line, they are punished. The rewards and punishments are also given in such a way that other people witness and remember them. It is a lesson for everyone in society to obey the norms. Most of the time, this process of reward and punishment trains us so well to fit in that we do not even need someone in a position of power to tell us what to do and what not to do. This process is what **Michel Foucault** called **self disciplining**.

Thus, we can say that sex is much more complicated than male and female, and gender is a culmination of norms of behaviour and norms which work along with other institutions of power as discussed before. However, most of us are so well trained into this system that we just keep following the norms of gender without ever questioning them.

Feminist thinkers have from time to time questioned the idea of gender by asking the question who/what is a woman? Black feminist **Sojourner Truth** wrote *Ain't I A Woman?* **Monique Wittig** has famously written *Lesbians Are Not Women* and **Toril Moi** has written *What is a Woman?* All of these writings have shown that **the category of gender is not static. It is constantly shifting and fluid.**

However, we are continuously told through different mediums in society what the norms of gender are. Some of us who challenge some of these norms also have to constantly struggle to be able to do so. For instance, women who drive have to constantly prove that they are good drivers. Or men who cook in the house, who do domestic chores, or want to be home makers, have to deal with being bullied and ridiculed for being not manly enough. Sometimes these punishments may be more drastic. For example, we often hear of people who marry outside the norms of caste and religion being rejected by their families and communities and sometimes even killed. We also hear of women who love other women killing themselves or being murdered by their families. These are all instances of being punished for transgressing norms of gender, caste, and/or religion.

Hence, gender as it appears today has been shaped by many of the above-mentioned systems of power.

Despite these very strict norms of gender, we do know most of us transgress them in various ways. However, one norm of gender which is perhaps the toughest to transgress is the norm of gender identity. We may have heard of some people who transgress the norms of gender identity, that is, they reject the gender that was given to them at the time of their birth and take on another identity. We may have also heard that they are often rejected by the entire society or pushed to the margins of society. Such people who reject the gender identity given to them at the time of their birth and take on another gender identity are known as transgender persons.

UNDERSTANDING TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES

But who actually is a transgender person?

The first image that comes to our mind when we think of a transgender person is probably that of a Hijra, right? Many of us may have had many questions about them.

In large parts of South Asia, the common perception of a transgender person is that of a Hijra, Kinnar, or Khojja who we may have seen on the streets. Another common perception is that transgender persons are those who are born as neither male nor as female. Others may believe that transgender persons are those who have the characteristics of men as well as women. A few people may believe that transgender people are those who identify with the gender opposite to what they are born as.

Some of these perceptions may be true, while others may be false, and some others may be partially true. Here we will try and understand the transgender identity and perhaps try to address some of the questions that a lot of people have about transgender persons.

Many of the popular perceptions regarding who a transgender person is come from the assumption that the two 'main' genders are man and woman. Man and woman are put in boxes that are completely different and opposite to each other. Since man and woman are seen as two completely different entities living in completely different boxes, another box is created to fit all the people who do not fit into the two boxes of man and woman.



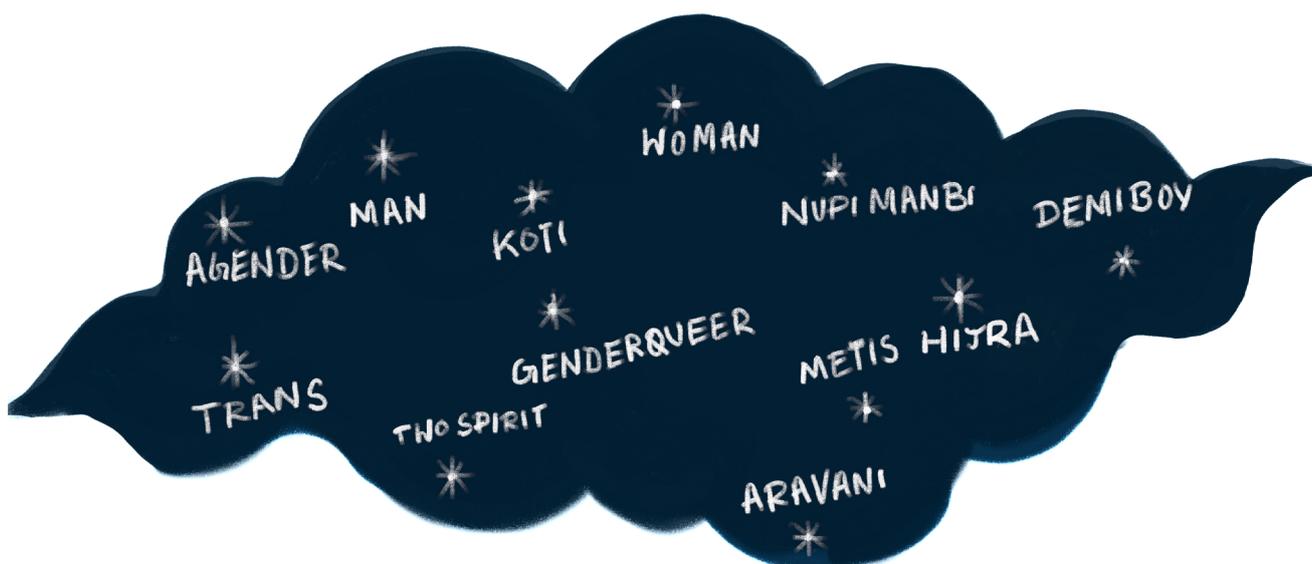
But now if we have read about how even our biology cannot be segregated neatly into two separate boxes, what do we do about gender?



After several years of struggling, coming together, building movements, doing advocacy with governments and international agencies, and writing about the issues of transgender persons, today many of our states have recognised the transgender identity. But most of the time when the state recognises the transgender identity, their imagination of gender is similar to the above three separate and disconnected boxes. Some people even within the transgender community believe that transgender is a separate category from man and woman. But as we had already discussed during our discussion on gender, often it is only the people who fall outside the norm who are made to question themselves without questioning the norms itself.

However, here we would like to look at the ideas of man and woman themselves critically. We look at the transgender identity as challenging the idea of the binary identities of man and woman as being the norm. Here gender is seen as a product of both patriarchy and heteronormativity. The various transgender identities question the idea of the two genders of man and woman as being the norm and man and woman as identities that lie on opposite sides of a spectrum. Instead, we think of the identities of man and woman as floating around with multiple other genders surrounding it.

Rather than existing in different boxes, gender exists as a more fluid entity, just like a cloud. It takes new shapes and looks different in different contexts.



So, who is a transgender person?

A transgender person is someone whose gender identity is different from the gender identity that was assigned to them at birth.

Does it mean that anyone who breaks gender norms is a transgender person? For example, if a woman climbs trees, plays football, drives a car, has short hair, etc. is she a transgender person?

Many people break different norms of gender at different points of their lives.

For example, we all know of a person who was assigned female at birth, who wears mostly pants, cuts her hair short, drives cars, climbs trees, or plays football. It does not necessarily mean that this person is a transgender person. Merely the transgression of some gender norms does not mean that a person is transgender. As long as this person continues to identify herself as a woman or doesn't have a problem being called or perceived as a woman, we should not assume that she is a transgender person.

Similarly, a person who was assigned male at birth, likes cooking, has long hair, likes wearing make-up, etc. but continues to identify as a man is a cisgender man. **A cisgender person is someone who continues to identify themselves with the gender that they were assigned at the time of their birth.** The word cisgender is derived from the Latin word 'cis' which means 'on this side of'. It has been used in chemistry to denote a molecular structure in which two particular atoms or groups lie on the same side of a given plane in the molecule. It is from this understanding that the word cisgender has come to mean a person whose gender identity lies on the same side as the gender that they were assigned.

We often hear the narrative that transgender persons are those who "feel trapped in the wrong body". While this may be true for some trans persons, it is not the only narrative of transgender persons. Different transgender persons have different experiences with their body as well as different experiences of being perceived as belonging to a gender.

Many people may feel that there are too many terms to remember. However, for people who identify with these terms, it helps them express their experiences into words. Often, these words are not well defined just like our experiences which are tough to define.

Do not worry if you don't understand the meaning of all the terms! What is more important is to remember the person's name and the pronouns which they use for themselves. The identity that a person uses for themselves is hardly of concern in most everyday interactions.

Gender identity is fluid and can change at any point in life. Some people start disassociating with their assigned gender identity at a very young age, while some others may start disassociating with it much later in life. Gender identity becomes very important in understanding transgender identities. As mentioned earlier, transgender persons transgress the norms of gender identity itself. This means they do not associate or identify with the gender identity that they were assigned when they were born, but they associate with some other gender identity.

Some transgender persons transgress gender identity within the binaries of man and woman. For example, when someone assigned female at birth does not identify as a woman but goes on to identify as a man, then they may be known as a transgender man or trans man. Hence, a trans man is a man who was assigned a different gender at the time of their birth. Similarly, a transgender woman or trans woman is a woman who was assigned a different gender at the time of their birth.

Apart from these binary transgender identities, there are many people who move away from the gender binary or challenge the binary by using other identities. These are known as non-binary transgender identities. Some such identities include gender queer, bigender, and agender among many others. Different people associate with and understand these terms differently.

Sometimes people may also feel that one gender identity is not enough to encompass their experience and may identify with more than one gender identity. For instance, a trans man or a trans woman could also identify as non-binary.

It is impossible to look at someone and tell their gender identity. Some people may transgress gender norms and be comfortable identifying themselves with the gender given at the time of their birth, while there may be other people who are not comfortable identifying with the gender given and identify with some other gender identity but may not be able to express themselves and their identity as they desire due to several constraints. Hence, the only way to ascertain someone's gender is when they come forward and tell us about their gender identity.

If we would like to be inclusive of transgender persons, one of the ways in which we could make our meetings and spaces inclusive is by requesting everyone to introduce themselves with their names and pronouns. It is also important that we recognise and respect the names and pronouns people use for themselves. If we are unsure about a persons' gender, we may use gender neutral words as far as possible.



Here are some gender neutral words that can be used instead of gendered words:

Chairperson instead of Chairman
Partner/Spouse instead of Husband/Wife
Child instead of Son/Daughter
Parent instead of Mother/Father
Sibling instead of Brother/Sister
Friends/Comrades/Everybody/Folks instead of Ladies/Gentleman

And here are some gender neutral pronouns:

They/Them/Theirs
(‘They’ as a singular pronoun has been declared acceptable by the dictionary as well as academic manuals!)

Ze/Hir/Hirs
Xe/Xem/Xyrs

And many more that you can find online!

The box below describes some of the gender identities that people may identify with. It is impossible to completely define these identities as people who identify with them may describe them in their own individual ways.

Agender: someone who does not associate with any gender or rejects the concept of gender for themselves.

Androgyne: A non-binary gender identity in which a person experiences their gender as both man and woman, neither man nor woman, and/or somewhere in between.

Aravani: an indigenous gender variant socio-cultural identity found in parts of South India.

Bigender: someone who associates with two genders.

Cisgender: someone who identifies with the sex and/or gender that they were assigned at the time of their birth.

Demigender/Demigirl/Demiboy: someone who experiences partial connection to one or more genders. Someone who experiences partial connection to woman or girl is a demigirl and someone who experiences partial connection to man or boy is a demiboy.

FTM: short form of female to male. Someone who was assigned female at birth and rejects it and changes their sex or desires to change their sex to male or identifies as male.

Gender fluid: having a gender that keeps changing.

Gender non-conforming/Gender variant: umbrella terms to refer to people whose gender identity and/or expressions are different from society's binary gender norms.

Gender queer: someone whose gender exists outside or beyond the binary concept of gender.

Graygender: a gender identity in which a person has a weak sense of gender and may be apathetic towards their gender identity and/or expression.

Hijra: an indigenous gender variant socio-cultural identity found in many parts of South Asia including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Khojja: an indigenous gender variant socio-cultural identity found mostly in Pakistan.

Kinnar: an indigenous gender variant socio-cultural identity found mostly in India.

Kothi: a kothi is usually a relatively feminine, sexually receptive person who is not castrated.

MTF: short form for male to female. Someone who was assigned male at birth and rejects it and changes their sex or desires to change their sex to female or identifies as female.

Neutrois: someone whose gender identity is neutral or null.

Nupi Manbi/Nupa Manba: an indigenous gender variant socio-cultural identity among the Meitai people of Manipur, India. Nupi Manbi is Meitailon for someone who is like a woman and Nupa Manba means someone who is like a man.

Pangender: an identity used to describe someone who experiences many and all genders at once.

Two Spirit: an indigenous gender variant socio-cultural identity found in Native American cultures.

Are people born transgender?

There is no possibility of ascertaining whether people are born transgender, in the same way as it is not possible to ascertain if someone is born as man or woman. People are usually assigned either male or female at birth and society assumes that they will grow up to identify as the gender corresponding to the sex assigned as birth. However, when people do not identify with the gender that corresponds to what they were expected to become, they sometimes identify as transgender.

People may be born with intersex variations, but they are often assigned a particular sex at birth. As mentioned before, sometimes surgeries are performed on persons born with intersex variations as an attempt to correct this variance and coercively fit them into the binary sexes. However, people who are born with intersex variations do not necessarily identify as transgender. Persons born with intersex variations often continue to identify as the gender they were assigned at birth throughout their lives. As discussed before, some persons born with intersex variations are given away by their parents at birth or at a very young age. These children are sometimes adopted by Hijra households or other such community socio-cultural groups and they grow up as transgender individuals. Some people who are born with intersex variations may identify as transgender later in their lives.

So are transgender persons not the same as persons with intersex variations?

Taking forward what has been written earlier, while most transgender persons are often confused with persons with intersex variations, and **while there are overlaps and similarities, the two groups of people are not necessarily the same.** The overlap is in the fact that persons with intersex variation may decide to identify as transgender at some point in their life. One big similarity however is that both groups of people would like the freedom to choose their own gender identity as well as their sexual characteristics. These choices sometimes require hormonal treatment and/or surgery. Both sets of people are often forced to identify within the binaries of sex and gender leading to various forms of struggle and discrimination. Hence it is important that we do not conflate the two groups and understand their distinct and specific needs.

Are there any physical or psychological conditions which lead to people identifying as transgender?

There are some scientific researches which have tried to establish genetic, chromosomal, and anatomical connection to transgender identities. At the same time, there are also studies that establish that human beings are not very sexually dimorphic or exist in two distinct forms. Thus, there is no study which is universally accepted that establishes conclusive physical connections between biology and gender. Therefore, it is difficult to give an explanation as to why people identify as transgender.

Very often, people in society assume that identifying as transgender is the result of a psychological condition and therefore a disorder. Contrary to this popular belief, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) - 5, which is used globally by mental health professionals, has removed gender identity as a disorder. **In May 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) passed a resolution to stop categorising being transgender as a “mental disorder”.**

However, according to the APA, some transgender persons may feel emotional distress over the mismatch between their gender identity and the sex they were assigned at birth. This condition of distress that people experience is enlisted in DSM 5 as **Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID)**. This distress or discomfort may be associated with how people perceive them and address them, the roles that they are expected to perform because of their assigned gender, or discomfort with parts of their body which are associated with a certain gender.

While all transgender persons may not experience gender dysphoria, it is very likely that they experience **gender euphoria**, which is the feeling of happiness or comfort when their gender is affirmed.

Can transgender persons be changed/cured/treated?

Since we have already discussed that identifying as a transgender person is not a disorder, either physical or mental, there is no reason to cure them. While several doctors as well as mental health professionals continue to claim to cure transgender persons, it has been made illegal in many countries. While in many countries, including India, the struggle for a specific law to criminalise conversion therapy continues, many multi-national health organisations such as **the World Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization have criticised conversion therapies as medical malpractices**. In India as well, legislations such as the Mental Health Care Act and Section 319 and Section 304-A of the Indian Penal Code have been used to attribute criminal liability for conversion therapy.

However, if a person is facing distress or dysphoria as a result of their gender identity, they may seek support from mental health professionals to reduce the distress.

Transgender persons may also undergo medical interventions to change their body in ways that affirm their gender identity. These medical interventions are known as **gender affirmative medical procedures**. These medical procedures include hormone replacement therapy, chest reconstruction surgeries (eg. double mastectomy, mammoplasty), genital reconstructive surgeries (eg. vaginoplasty, phalloplasty), facial feminisation surgeries, vocal cord surgery, and more.

Gender Affirmative Surgeries is often the preferred term over Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) or Sex Change Operation because these procedures are undertaken for trans persons to affirm their gender and have a more positive connotation than SRS.

Are these surgeries necessary to identify as transgender? Do transgender persons become transsexual after surgery?

No, surgeries are not necessary for a person to identify as transgender. While some transgender persons undergo surgery to reduce the distress associated with the mismatch in their gender identity, some others do it so that they do not have to face stigma and discrimination while negotiating public spaces.

However, many transgender persons may not want surgery. Several others may not be able to afford surgery and other medical procedures. **Hence, surgery is not necessary to identify as a transgender person.**

Transsexual is an older term for persons whose gender identities do not match with the sex assigned to them at birth and those who desire or have undergone medical transitions to align their bodies to their gender identity. A lot of transgender persons have rejected the term in contemporary times because of its overemphasis on the person's anatomy and genitals. However, some people continue to use this term to identify themselves. While it is not acceptable to use the word transsexual as an umbrella term or as a term for people who have undergone medical transition, it can be used for those people who choose to identify as such.

People do not socially or medically transition to 'become' another gender. People are always the gender that they associate themselves with, irrespective to whether they declare it or not.

We often hear other terms such as 'eunuch' and 'hermaphrodite' being used instead of transgender. What do these words mean?

'Eunuch' and 'hermaphrodite' are derogatory terms often used for transgender persons. Eunuch is often used for transgender women while the word itself means a castrated man. The word is problematic because it assumes that trans women are men who remove their genitals. It completely denies transgender persons the right to determine their own gender identity. The word hermaphrodite means a person born with both male and female reproductive organs. As explained previously, transgender persons are not born with male and female reproductive organs so it is incorrect to use the term for transgender persons. **Apart from being incorrect, these words have also been historically used in a derogatory manner for the transgender community to stigmatise them.**

Some outdated and offensive gender identity terms:

Hermaphrodite, she-male, homo, 50-50, chhakka, eunuch, he-she

What is the difference between transvestite or cross dressers and transgender persons?

Transvestite is a term which was coined around 1910 by **Magnus Hirschfeld**. The term was used to refer to a person who likes to dress up in the attire designed for the opposite gender for pleasure. Trans means 'across' or 'over' and vestitus means 'dressed'. Hence, it is also known as cross dressing. If we look at gender as beyond the binary of man and woman, then the term may make less sense today.

Transvestite is not the same as transgender because while the former only refers to a transgression in gender expression of dress, it may not necessarily mean that the person also wants to identify with a gender different from the one that they were given at the time of their birth. There are several people who like to cross dress for sexual pleasure, theatrical performance, etc. but do not identify as transgender.

Are transgender people part of South Asian culture or is it a western import?

While the word transgender itself maybe an English word, historically in the South Asian context there have been several socio-cultural identities associated with people who transgress their gender identity. **Literature across South Asia has shown the existence of gender variant identities historically.** Some such identities which are commonly recognised are Hijra in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh; Zenana, Khusras, and Khojja in Pakistan; Metis in Nepal; and Aravanis, Joggapas, Kinnar, and Nupi Manbi among many others in different parts of India.

These socio-cultural identities have been the space that gender non-conforming persons have created for themselves to be able to negotiate a world divided on the basis of two sexes and their corresponding genders. As discussed earlier, some people who did not fit into society because they showed variation in their sexual characteristics found a community in these socio-cultural groups. In other cases, as children start showing early signs of gender nonconformity, they are either thrown out of their families or escape their violent families to find a community here.

During colonial times, in the Indian sub-continent these communities were also classified under different caste categories which were considered as "mendicant and vagrant castes" and often considered as criminals. This status continues to be associated with these groups.

Apart from these socio-cultural gender identities, many transgender persons in South Asia today also identify with the various transgender identities discussed earlier.

FEMINISM AND TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES

So, if gender is a social construct and transgender people are not born or there are no particular causes which necessarily lead to people identifying as transgender, why do people take up these identities? After all, if one wants to break away from these norms, what is the need to fit into some other gender? Many people also go on to say that some trans women and trans men follow the norms of gender even more strictly than 'real' men and women.

The use of the term 'real' man and woman for people who are not transgender, conveys that transgender persons' sense of their gender as man and woman is not real.

The argument that gender is a social construct is often used to argue and erase the identities of transgender persons. However, the same argument is rarely used to say that the identity of man or woman should not exist. It is also often argued that because gender is a social construct, if someone wants to change their body or their expression to match their sense of gender, then it is conforming to the same oppressive norms.

Judith Butler, who is considered to be one of the pioneers to have written about gender as a social construct, has argued that social construction of gender does not mean that someone's sense of their gender is not real and they can easily pick and choose their gender. She also says that it does not mean that our human experience is completely disconnected from the body.

While everyone is taught these norms of gender and how they are supposed to conduct their bodies at different points, none of us manage to follow these norms perfectly. Which means that everyone is constantly negotiating how to live with these norms. Everyone also constantly chooses how to live with their bodies and how much to change them. In that sense of the term, **there is no "natural" body that a human being lives with throughout their lives.** People choose to cut their hair, they choose to remove or shave their facial and bodily hair, they paint tattoos over their bodies to mark their different identities, they remove their organs or tissues when it creates trouble for them, they wear spectacles, hearing aids, and place pace-makers as life support, and more.

Similarly, transgender persons are also taught the norms of gender and they too negotiate with the norms constantly. Transgender persons also make constant negotiations and choices regarding how to live in their bodies and the changes they want to make to it. They may choose to remove or reconstruct certain parts of their bodies to help them function better.

These negotiations are more challenging for transgender persons because their identity and experience is already considered invalid by everyone around them. They have to constantly prove their experience to others, and hence transgressing the norms becomes tougher for them. Many times, transgressing the norms does not just lead to their identity being invalidated, but can also be life threatening. For instance, if a transgender woman uses the women's bathroom and she is not perceived by others as a woman, she is likely to face physical abuse. At the same time, if she enters the men's bathroom, she will have to self-invalidate her gender identity and she may also end up facing physical and sexual violence in the bathroom. Hence, her best option for survival is to follow the norms of gender as strictly as possible.

Putting the entire burden of challenging and disrupting the norms of gender, patriarchy, and heteronormativity on the ones who are most marginalised by the system is not very beneficial in terms of questioning the system itself. It ends up alienating the marginalised from the struggle towards changing the system while those in positions of power continue to enjoy their privilege without feeling the need to question their own identity.

Can we address the issues of transgender persons without talking about patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other systems of powers such as caste, race, class, and religion which lead to oppression?

If we talk of the transgender identity without addressing issues of patriarchy and heteronormativity, we will reduce the transgender identity to a separate box. If we end up creating an “other” box, we will firstly end up excluding trans persons who experience their gender within the binaries (i.e. as man and woman) and secondly, we will club all people who do not associate with the gender given to them at birth into one category. This completely erases away the diversity of identities and experiences within the transgender umbrella without really challenging the idea of binary gender itself.

However, it is also equally important to recognise the oppression that transgender persons experience when they do not associate with the gender assigned to them at birth. Since we live in a binary gender world and everything is segregated into two genders, transgender persons would be constantly excluded. Even transgender persons who associate with the binary of man and woman would have to put in extra labour to change their identity cards and undergo much scrutiny and many procedures to get their gender validated. This is excluding the violence that they may have to face while they come to terms with their identity and assert it.

To address the issues and discrimination faced by transgender persons, it is important to address heteronormativity which makes the binary sex-gender system as well as patriarchy which gives power to certain people who are seen as men and adhere to all the norms associated with it.

Since gender and its norms are shaped by all other institutions of power, if we are to imagine diversity in gender without hierarchies, it is important that we address the hierarchies that are created by other systems of power as well.

Why is the transgender issue a feminist issue?

If feminism is a movement toward gender equality, then the issue of transgender persons is by default a feminist issue.

In recent times, social media has brought forth the issues of gender critical feminists or more famously known as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) who have claimed that anyone born with a vagina belongs to the oppressed sex class, while anyone born with a penis is automatically an oppressor and gender is a system that solely exists to oppress women. However, this completely overlooks the fact that **the system of gender oppresses anyone who transgresses the norms.**

If we are to be critical of gender norms and look at feminism as an ideology that has a shared responsibility in breaking away the forced norms of binary sex and gender, then transness becomes a core part of it.

Since the transgender identity challenges and transgresses an important aspect of the binary norms of gender, it also has the potential to question and reconfigure other norms. **At the core of the transgender identity lies a questioning of biological essentialism of sex and gender.** It disconnects the biology of a person from the gender identity of the person. As the transgender identity poses a radical challenge to the binary view of looking at sex and its connection to gender, it can potentially challenge other aspects of gender too, such as gender roles, attributes, and expressions.

Patriarchy benefits from maintaining the binaries of sex and gender. Under patriarchy, the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed are decided by society on the basis of the difference in people's biology. Thus, it enforces ideologies and social norms which ensure that the binary is maintained. The transgender identity challenges this biological basis of defining the oppressor and the oppressed. Hence, it has the potential to challenge patriarchy by imagining a world in which there is biological and social diversity that does not lead to social hierarchies.

However, in the end, if all these complicated theories and ideologies seem a little too heavy and too much to understand, it is okay. **At the core of it all are the values of empathy, respect and dignity.** It is okay to not understand what the other person feels like, identifies as, or the reasons behind it. However, what is important is that we respect how people want to be themselves identified and recognised.



