

Gender and sex are terms that are often used interchangeably. However, despite the similarities between these words, they are two separate concepts.

What is sex?

Sex can most easily be explained as the bodily characteristics that scientifically classify someone as male, female, or intersex. These physical aspects include genitals, hormone levels, chromosomes, internal sex organs, and secondary sex characteristics. It is important to note that many gender scholars argue that scientific classifications regarding sex are also developed within and influenced by the cultural and social climate in which they are determined.

What is gender?

Gender is distinct from sex. Gender can be determined by a person's outward appearance, behavior, and presentation, but is ultimately based upon the identity of the person regardless of (and sometimes in contrast to) their sex. Gender refers to the characteristics people depend upon in order to signify femininity, masculinity, or androgyny/nonconformity. Common terms that correlate with gender are man, woman, transgender, gender-queer or gender nonconforming.

What is gender identity/expression?

Gender identity refers to the internal, psychological identification with a specific gender, or identification as nonconforming/gender-queer, regardless of one's assigned sex or sex characteristics. Gender identity is self-determined based upon the person's recognition of the gender with which they affiliate. *Gender expression* refers to the ways a person outwardly expresses their gender identity through clothing, behavior, and appearance and generally relies on signifiers that can be recognized by others in society. People who identify as gender-queer or gender nonconforming typically (but not always) blend gender signifiers that disrupt society's categorization of the person's gender.

What does cisgender mean?

Cisgender is a term that is used to describe people who operate within a privileged position because their biological sex matches their gender identity based upon society's expectations. *Cis* is the Latin prefix that means "on the near side of." For instance, a person who is born biologically female and identifies as a (feminine) woman. Typically (but not always) cisgender individuals also have a gender expression that meets the social expectations of their sex, or what is considered normative.

What does it mean to be transgender/transsexual?

Transgender is commonly understood as an umbrella term to describe someone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and/or whose identity is gender variant—consisting of both masculine and feminine features or rejects gender expectations of men and women in order to create their own personal understanding of gender. Someone who identifies as *transsexual* typically considers their assigned sex at birth to be incorrect and often (but not always) identifies with what is commonly understood as the opposite sex and gender. Many times people who identify as transsexual seek procedures to transition socially and physically into their true sex and gender. Additionally, trans* is a contemporary term that is also being used to be inclusive of transgender, transsexual, and all gender-queer, gender-variant, gender nonconforming and gender questioning people.

What are gender roles and gender stereotypes?

Gender roles are the sets of expectations that a culture prescribes to each gender about how that gender should look, behave and the positions they should hold in society. For instance, in the United States, women are expected to dress and look feminine, behave more passively than men and to be in caregiving roles. Similarly, *gender stereotypes* are created when people in a society assume that people of a certain gender will and should behave in the ways prescribed by gender roles. For example, the assumption that all men are aggressive discourages men from responding with sensitivity for fear of being seen as weak. Gender roles and gender stereotypes are limiting to *all* genders because they suffocate a person's ability to explore their gender identities and step outside of the binary of male/female and man/woman.

Where can I find more information about these topics?

MSU Women's Resource Center

<http://wrc.msu.edu>

517-353-1635

332 Union Building

MSU LBGT Resource Center

<http://lbgtrc.msu.edu/>

517-353-9520

302 Student Services Building

MSU Center for Gender in Global Context

<http://gencen.isp.msu.edu/>

517-353-5040

206 International Center

Gender Education & Advocacy

A national organization to support gender-variant individuals and educate others.

<http://www.gender.org/>

TransWhat?: A Guide Towards Allyship

A website which provides information and introduces concepts and terms related to gender and how to be an ally to the transgender community.

<http://transwhat.org/>

True Child

A national organization dedicated to educating about gender oppression.

<http://truechild.org>

Definitions in this document have been influenced by <http://transwhat.org/glossary/>.