

Gender and sex are often used interchangeably; cross-cultural ethnographic evidence indicates that gender does not necessarily have a biological basis.

Sex differences are biological and can be referred to as male, female or intersex. Intersex is a term associated with a person born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that falls outside male or female categorisation. Those born in this latter category may have a medical intervention whilst still a baby, or at a later stage, usually puberty, and then be allowed to decide whether to remain as they are or choose one of the conventional binary options.¹

In comparison to differences in sexual definition, according to the WHO, gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed and who adopt the norms, behaviours and roles associated with them as well as relationships with each other.² This is the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes, but this may appear quite different in other cultural settings.

One example of a distinction in one society's view of gender roles is the Fa'afafine of Samoa. These people identify as a third gender, male by sex but engaging in female activities. Other than some religious groups, they are well-accepted in Samoan culture.³ This challenges binary gender roles and demonstrates that gender is culturally defined. However, gender also produces inequalities that intersect with other social inequalities, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation. This is referred to as intersectionality.⁴ This is also referred to as gender stratification and is not reflective of just individuals but entire groupings describing an "unequal distribution of rewards between men and women."⁵

¹ Davis, D.L. and Whitten, R.G., "The Cross-Cultural Study of Human Sexuality," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 16 (1987), pp. 69-98.

² WHO, "Gender and Health," World Health Organization, 2022.

³ Samuels, G., cited in Gaetano, A.M. and Gaetano, A., "A Feminist Reflection on Ethnographic Research in China," *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 23.1 (2016).

⁴ WHO, "Gender and Intersectionality," World Health Organization, 2023.

⁵ Kottak, C.P., *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2019).

Gender and sex are related to but different from gender identity; this often refers to a person's deeply felt belief in their identity. And as Friedl suggests, "the biological nature of men and women should not be seen as a limiting binary position but rather as a broad base upon which various structures can be built."⁶ The roles in which individuals find themselves are assigned by their cultures, often, starting with childhood enculturation. In many societies, the male is seen as the producer and the female as the nurturer, but this is not universal.

For instance, in the Ju/'Hoansi San in South Africa, gender roles were interdependent in their activities, with no clear gender stratification between required activities.⁷ Further reduced gender stratification is where economies are typified by male travel doing long-distance trading and females adopting roles of both carers for children and local traders, a usual male occupation.⁸ For example, a study by Amadiume indicated that either sex of the Igbo in eastern Nigeria could adopt male gender roles; Igbo women used wealth to gain status and have wives whilst still maintaining their own femininity.⁹

Although in earlier years, the majority of societies were patriarchal, particularly in Western societies, with women being treated as inferior in social and political rights, economic changes have brought about a reduction in the need for physical labour in many occupations. This has seen an increase in work opportunities for women apart from the accepted and expected gender roles such as nursing and teaching.¹⁰

Sex is more easily described in a biological context, but it can be seen that gender has to be viewed as containing a kaleidoscope of identities (roles) with its own identifiable social stratification.

⁶ Friedl, E., cited in Bolin, A., "Traversing Gender," in *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures* (Routledge, 2002), pp. 22-51.

⁷ Kramer, K.L., "Female Cooperation," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 378.1868 (2023), p. 20210425.

⁸ Lahelma, E. and Gordon, T., "Comparative and Cross-Cultural Ethnography," in *Restructuring the Truth of Schooling* (2010), pp. 113-130.

⁹ Amadiume cited in Herdt, G., "Clinical Ethnography and Sexual Culture," *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 10.1 (1999), pp. 100-119.

¹⁰ Wood, W. and Eagly, A.H., "A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Behavior of Women and Men," *Psychological Bulletin*, 128.5 (2002), p. 699.

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