

Are GIRLS BORN or MADE?

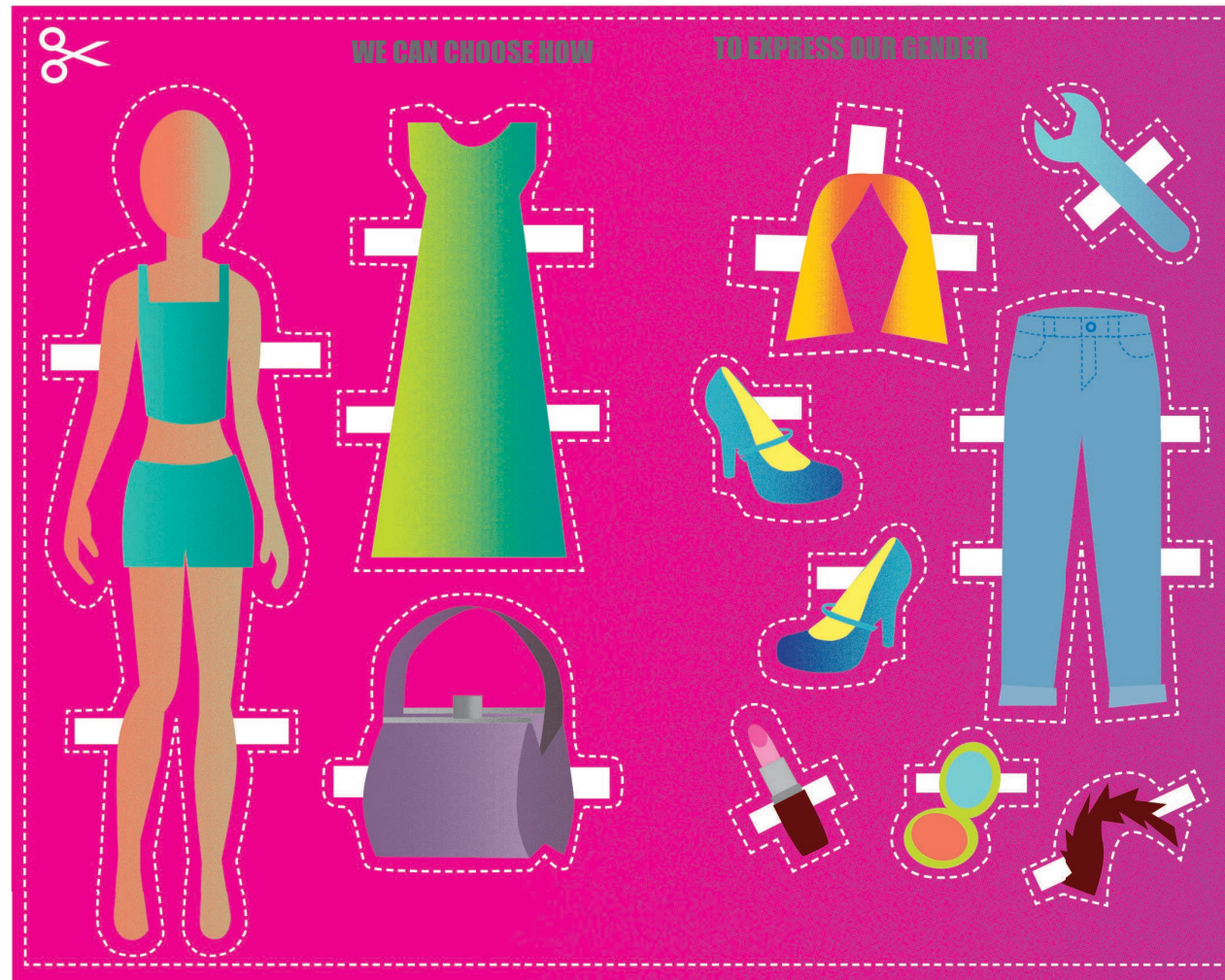
Much of what causes us to view someone as male or female isn't about their sex at all, but their gender—the way they present themselves. When Simone de Beauvoir stated in 1949 that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” she was paving the way for feminist theorists who examined whether gender was something innate or learned.

Sex, gender, and society

In *The Second Sex*, French feminist Simone de Beauvoir argued that society is constructed by men, so we come to understand the concept of “woman” through male eyes. In such a world, the masculine is the privileged norm and the feminine becomes marginalized, or “other.” De Beauvoir was talking about our concepts of men and women, not just as their physical bodies but everything that causes them to be perceived as masculine or feminine. She was saying that ideas about what makes a man or a woman come from society.

Sex and gender

Early second-wave feminists explored this idea of a person's gender as separate from their sex. Sex referred to biologically different categories of “male” and “female,” based on chromosomes, hormones, and sex organs. Gender described a person's “masculinity” or “femininity,” based on social and cultural differences—their behavior, mannerisms, and presentation. Increasingly, gender was understood as separate from physical sex—something learned and influenced by society rather than innate. This idea is known as the “social construction” of gender. British sociologist Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) suggested



that Western culture exaggerates gender differences and we should think of gender as being on a continuum rather than being two binary opposites.

Doing gender

Feminists showed the many ways in which gender is constructed through how we present ourselves—the clothes and hairstyles we wear, the hobbies and jobs we pick, and the names our parents give us. These things are culturally determined, not fixed. There's no reason that certain hairstyles should be for girls and others for boys, except that our culture says so. Feminists argue that these things suggest differences between the sexes. Judith Butler, an American gender theorist, sees gender as “performative.” She suggests

BACHA POSH

In parts of Afghanistan, a country where boys are symbols of prestige with access to privileges such as education that are denied to girls, families may bring up a daughter as a son. Bacha posh, meaning “dressed like a boy,” is a reaction to a gender-segregated society, but it shows how the trappings of gender are rooted in nurture rather than nature.



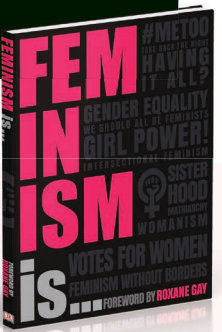
it is not based on any biological “essence” of being a man or woman but is something we construct in our social interactions, so it eventually comes to feel natural. In this sense, gender is something that we do, rather than something we are born with.

Beyond the gender binary

When we think about gender in this way it is possible to see that men and women can express both masculinity and femininity, so we can talk about female masculinity or male femininity. It is also possible to be female and not a woman (see pp 56–57). Furthermore, if gender is socially constructed, so are unequal power relations. If we can recognize this, it may be possible to transform society and move toward equality.

“We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman.”

Judith Butler (2011)



For the curious

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Is GENDER fixed?

Feminists have long believed that gender stereotypes of how a man or a woman should be are harmful and restrictive. Now some also question the very idea that gender is just two fixed categories. Today, many feminists are working to make the ways we recognize gender more inclusive for everyone.

Born this way

One of the first questions people ask about a baby is whether it is a boy or a girl. But is gender really so simple? For a long time, theories assumed that gender was divided into two distinct categories of “masculine” and “feminine,” related to two fixed categories for biological sex (male and female). However, people whose gender identity doesn’t match the sex they were assigned at birth have existed throughout history and across many cultures. Today, they are referred to as transgender or trans. Those whose sex and gender identities do “match” are called cisgender.

Questioning gender ideas

Trans people may draw on various processes to affirm their gender identity, including hormone treatments and surgery, which can give them the opportunity to “transition” to the gender they identify with. However, for this to take place many countries require a diagnosis of “gender dysphoria”—a mental health condition defined as feeling one’s gender is opposite to one’s sex. While many trans people find these processes helpful, recent theory has emphasized that there is no right or wrong way to be trans. Many have championed new ways of thinking about gender, pointing out that some people identify as non-binary (not male or female) or gender fluid and use the pronouns “they/them.” Trans activists have criticized the “medical

model” of approaching gender, which sees being trans as a mental illness, and they have also criticized the cultural obsession with trans people’s bodies.

US academic Sandy Stone has examined how transgender people are pressured to “pass” as cisgender by performing masculine or feminine gender stereotypes. She argues that the necessity of passing only exists because society is transphobic (prejudiced against trans people) and relies upon

CAITLYN JENNER

Perhaps the most famous US transgender woman, Caitlyn Jenner transitioned in 2015 and has done much work to raise awareness of the issues facing transgender people, arguing for a more inclusive society. The documentary *I Am Cait* followed Caitlyn’s life after her transition.



categorizing everyone into only two opposing genders. For her, transgender identity can be a wholly unique gender identity that does not erase life before transition. Stone and other US theorists, such as Susan Stryker and Julia Serano, have also addressed transphobia within the women’s movement. Some feminists see transgender women as “born male,” and argue they have therefore benefitted from male privilege and do not share the same oppression as cisgender women. Stone says we need to be more inclusive and focus on the real issues, such as the need for legal and structural reform in how we classify gender and an awareness of the intersections between misogyny, transphobia, and other forms of oppression.

Transforming culture

Many issues still exist for trans people or those with other gender identities. For example, in the UK the Gender Recognition Act allows people to change their official gender, but only with a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria.

“There is no reason to assume that genders ought... to remain as two.”

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990)

Activists have campaigned for self-identification measures that would allow people to do this without diagnosis, but have often been opposed. Transgender people (women of color in particular) also experience high levels of abuse and violence. But many are working to improve the situation. The UK charity Mermaids provides support for families with trans children, and in recent years trans people have become much more visible in the media, generating new debates about gender.

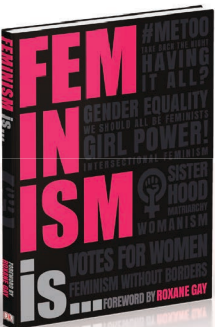


See also: 52–53, 58–59, 72–73



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GIRLS who like GIRLS

Feminists have long argued that female sexuality should be considered as important as male sexuality. But what does this mean for women who are interested in dating other women? Often facing both sexism and homophobia, lesbian and bisexual women have had their own set of struggles.

Double trouble

In a male-focused society, women who like women can be seen as a double threat—firstly because they go against the heterosexual “norm,” and secondly because they demonstrate the fact that female sexuality does not only exist to serve the needs of men. Feminists such as US writer Adrienne Rich have shown how society has portrayed lesbians as deviant, sick, or sinful in order to uphold the notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” (see pp 34–35). Historically, many countries around the world have refused to acknowledge the existence of lesbianism, and it took famous legal cases such

as the 1928 obscenity trials of English lesbian author Radclyffe Hall to bring it to public attention. Lesbians haven’t always been criminalized in the same way gay men have, but they have faced homophobia and violence. Throughout history, lesbians have always played an important role in the women’s movement.

“Give us also the right to our existence!”

Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928)

Multiple identities

Women who identify as lesbians can express their identity in many ways. During the 20th century, terms like “butch” (usually meaning traditionally masculine in style and self-presentation) and “femme” (feminine in style) began to be used in lesbian subculture. Some feminists saw these labels as just replicating restrictive heterosexual gender roles, but others, such as US author Joan Nestle and US academic Anne Fausto-Sterling, have argued that all masculine and feminine gender identities are socially constructed—not some “natural” and others imitations. Therefore, butch and femme are unique forms of lesbian self-expression.

Not all women who like women are lesbians. Many may identify as bisexual, pansexual, or gender fluid and reject what they see as strict labels. Because of their often conventionally feminine appearance, femme lesbians and bisexual women have had problems getting their sexuality recognized. The terms “bi-invisibility” and “bi-erasure” were concepts developed by bisexuals in the 1990s who found the LGBTQ community didn’t always see them as truly queer. But things are changing. Mainstream US girls’ magazine *Teen Vogue* gives advice for how to avoid assuming heterosexuality is the default, and a 2017 survey from anti-bullying initiative Ditch the Label found that 57 percent of teens sampled in the UK and US said they didn’t fit into the traditional definition of heterosexuality.

JEWELLE GOMEZ

US author Jewelle Gomez explores many of the issues surrounding being an LGBTQ woman of color in her work. Gomez (right) and her wife Diane Sabin (left) were part of the campaign for same-sex marriage in California, which was initially legalized in 2008 but then faced further legal challenges.



Pride and prejudice

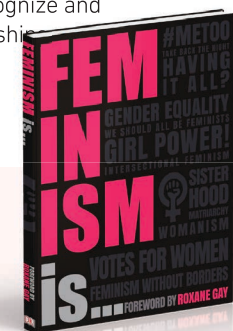
The situation for same-sex couples continues to improve, and throughout the 2000s and 2010s many countries passed laws to allow same-sex marriage. Lesbian role models can be seen on TV, such as US actress, comic, and TV host Ellen DeGeneres, and actresses such as Lea de Laria and Ruby Rose have been cast in prominent lesbian roles. However, in the media, male gay relationships are still more visible than female ones. A 2017–2018 survey showed that gay men make up the majority of regular LGBTQ characters (47 percent) on TV shows, with lesbians making up just 24 percent. Although prejudices still exist, increased visibility and activism is helping recognize and celebrate female same-sex relationships.

See also: 34–35, 56–57, 58–59, 72–73, 80–81



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INTERSECTING identities

Intersectionality is a word you may have seen and heard increasingly in the media. The term was first coined in 1989 by law professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. She used the metaphor of the intersection, or crossroads, to explore how race and gender affect the lives of women in different ways. Today, disability, sexual orientation, class, and age are also included in this concept.

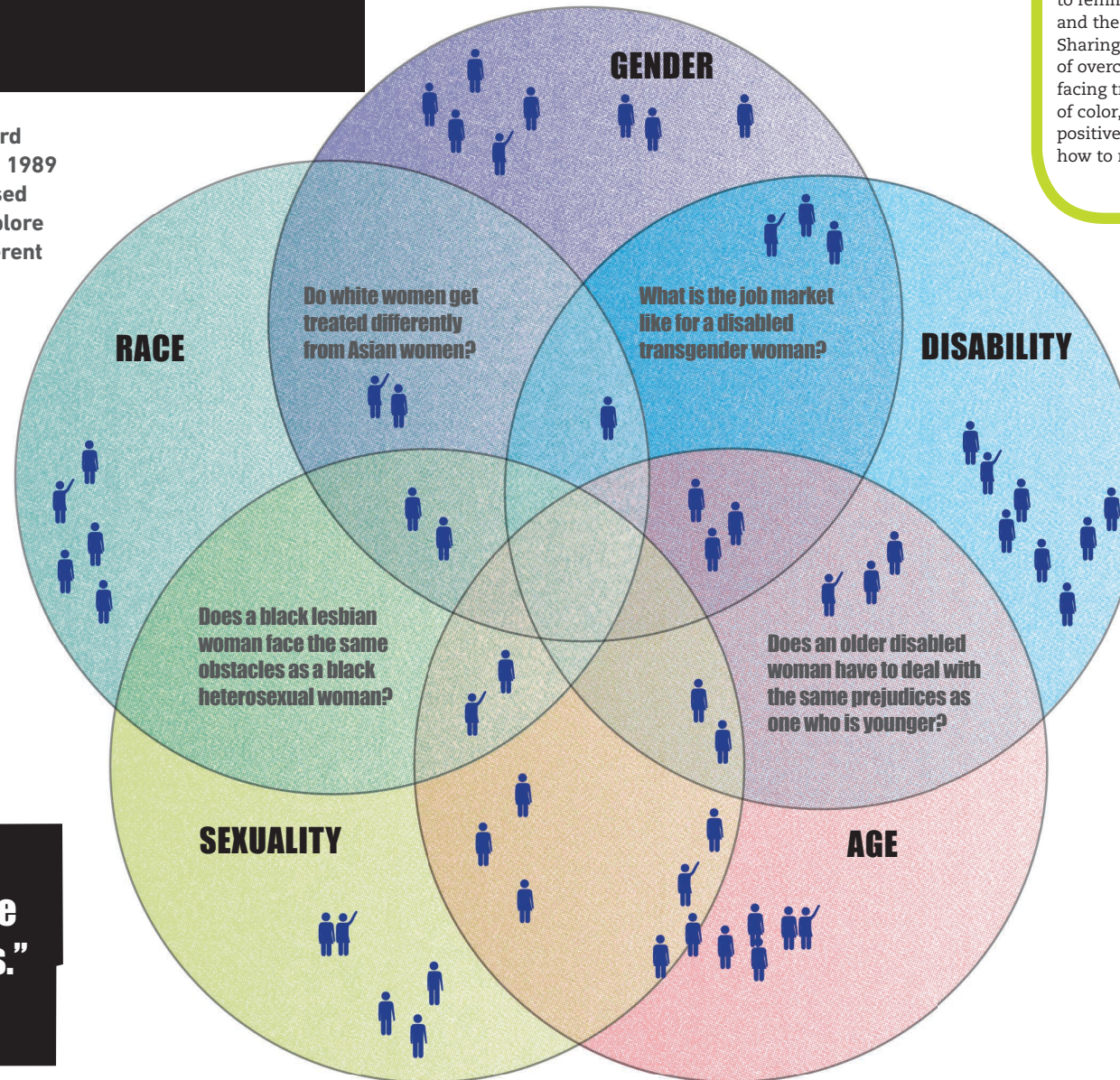
American origins

While women in general can be considered as an oppressed group, it is not as simple as that. Crenshaw, an American activist and legal scholar, argues that the experiences of black women are not the same as those of white women, and neither are they the same as those of black men. Black women are affected by both racism and sexism, not one or the other. She developed this theory after coming across a legal case in which an African American woman accused a company of not employing her because she was a black woman. The company argued that it wasn't racist—it had black employees; nor was it sexist—it had female employees. The case was thrown out. But the black workers were all men, and the female ones were all white. Crenshaw realized that since there was no

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't live single-issue lives.”

Audre Lorde (1982)

HOW DO ASPECTS OF YOUR OWN IDENTITY AFFECT YOUR LIFE? AND WHAT ABOUT WOMEN AROUND YOU?



FEMINISM FOR ALL

American transgender actress and activist Laverne Cox speaks out on issues that affect transgender women in relation to feminism, intersectionality, and the #MeToo movement. Sharing her experiences of overcoming the obstacles facing transgender women of color, she sends out positive messages on how to move forward.

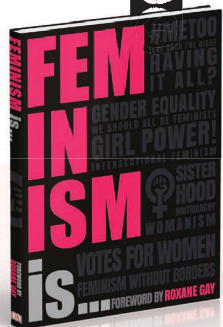


term for the double set of prejudices affecting this woman, the problem was hard to pinpoint and discuss. Crenshaw also looked at the issue of domestic violence to argue that feminist work has often overlooked black women's experiences and the black community has often ignored the gendered nature of the abuse.

Intersectionality in action

Since the term intersectionality was first used, the concept has been widened by academics, including Patricia Hill Collins, Sirma Bilge, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson to include ethnicity, class, poverty, sexuality, the whole gender spectrum, age, (dis)ability, and religion. We often think of these identities as straightforward binaries, or opposites—male/female, white/black, young/old, straight/gay, rich/poor. Within each set, one identity is considered the norm, and enjoys a privileged status in society, while the other may experience prejudice. Intersectional feminism considers how multiple identities may combine and interact to produce an individual's experience of discrimination. An older, white, middle-class, lesbian woman will face different prejudices to those experienced by a young, black, working-class, heterosexual woman. Intersectionality tries to take account of these overlapping identities so that no marginalized groups are overlooked.

See also: 42-43, 56-57, 62-63, 70-71, 88-89, 104-105



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