

## Chapter 10 Experiences of Gender Across Culture

MaryBeth Chrostowsky

### Learning Objectives

- Understand the concept of gender as a social and cultural construct rather than a biological or innate characteristic.
- Identify the ways in which gender roles, expectations, and norms vary across different societies and cultures.
- Examine the historical and cross-cultural variations in gender identities, including the Recognition and acceptance of non-binary and third-gender categories.
- Examine the impacts of globalization, migration, and transnational movements on gender norms and identities.
- Reflect on personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases related to gender, sex, and sexual orientation, and examine how one's own cultural context influences perceptions and understanding of gender.

### Gender as a Cultural Concept

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Gender, like kinship discussed in the last chapter, feels natural and is often believed to be rooted in our biology. But, like kinship, gender is a cultural construction. **Gender** refers to culturally created expectations of male and female personalities, interests, abilities, and roles in society. For example, the traditional view in US culture is that girls wear dresses, like dolls, are delicate and tend to cry or be emotional, are nurturing and hence, make better caregivers. Traditionally boys wear pants, like trucks, play rough, and do not cry. Men are brave, strong physically, and rational; therefore, they make better providers. Despite the fact that we all know men who are wonderful caregivers and women who are strong physically and rational, these gender constructions hold firm in our US culture.

The Euro-American privileging of biological sex is not universal. The global ethnographic record, both present and past, describes many different ways of thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality. You will learn in this chapter that cultures have many ways of organizing their thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality. For example, some cultures have more than just two genders that we are accustomed to and acknowledge. These third and fourth genders often are not stigmatized but instead respected as spiritually evolved. While we will cover this topic of

sex and gender later in this chapter, it is worth noting here that sex and gender are not interchangeable concepts. Gender is a fundamental aspect of one's identity, and it shapes relationships, roles, and agency in a given society. Gender directs individuals on how to act, believe, make sense of their experiences, and even think about themselves (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2017).

Consider beauty pageants like Miss America, Miss Universe, or, more locally, Miss Georgia. In the US, these are clearly and unequivocally female activities. Women prepare by wearing makeup, styling their hair, and dressing in stunning gowns to finally be judged on their beauty. These pageants fit the American gendered norms; of beauty and makeup as female, as feminine. Men do not and would not participate in such an activity. However, among the Wodaabe of Niger, the men, not the women, participate in community beauty pageants. Among the Wodaabe, men focus on the ideal of beauty and who are the contestants. Wodaabe men will wear their finest makeup, clothes, and beads to be judged by the women. This practice, known as the **Gerewol**, is a courtship ritual where the males compete for the attention of potential marriage partners. Click on the following link to watch a four-minute video on the Gerewol titled, Tribal Beauty Pageant for Men: <https://youtu.be/Dm1tN3SmDWs>. You may also be interested in the wonderful photos of a Gerewol found at this link: [https://humanplanet.com/timothyallen/2011/01/gerewol\\_wodaabe\\_niger\\_bbc-human-planet-deserts/](https://humanplanet.com/timothyallen/2011/01/gerewol_wodaabe_niger_bbc-human-planet-deserts/)

A **gender role** is a task or activity a culture assigns to each sex. Traditionally, in the US, most domestic chores, such as cooking and cleaning, are the responsibility of women. Moreover, when working outside the home, women typically take jobs that match the cultural construction of women as nurturing, like nurses or elementary school teachers. Men are traditionally responsible for the chores outside the home, like yard work home repairs. Men take jobs that match the cultural construction of men as strong and decisive, taking employment in jobs like mechanics, CEOs, or construction workers.

A concept related to gender roles is **gender stereotypes**. Gender stereotypes are oversimplified but strongly held expectations about the character or behaviors of males and females. For example, girls are better at English, and boys are better at math. Or men are better drivers than women. The traditional image of a boy carrying a girl's books home from school fits the US gendered ideal of boys as assertive and girls as meek. A true gentleman will always offer to carry heavy items for a woman. However, among the Dinka of South Sudan, the women carry

heavy loads. Upon seeing his wife carrying a heavy bucket of water or bag of millet, a husband would never offer to carry the load for her, nor would she allow him to carry it. It would be embarrassing to her if anyone saw the man carrying while the woman moved with nothing in her arms.

Training girls to be women and boys to be men is central to children's socialization or enculturation. As discussed early in the text, enculturation can be direct or indirect. An example of direct learning is when a parent tells their child how to act. Some of you may have heard someone tell a young boy to stop crying because "real men don't cry" or "buck up and be a man." Both teach the young boy that men should not be emotional or allow themselves to feel sad and to be tough or strong in the face of a challenge. Some of you may have heard "girls are to be seen, not heard" or "knees together and sit like a lady." These instructions tell young girls that women should be meek, quiet, and modest.

Sometimes the cues for appropriate female and male behavior or interests are communicated indirectly. Toys are an excellent example. In the US, toys marketed to boys typically include trucks, action figures, and building sets or toys that encourage solving problems, taking charge, and spatial or math skills. For girls, we often see dolls, baking or tea sets, and dress up/make up stations. These toys encourage nurturing, domestic life skills, and beauty. Both sets of toys align with the culturally constructed gendered ideals for males and females in the US.

There is nothing inherently wrong with girls playing with dolls or boys playing with trucks. However, a culture's construction of masculinity and femininity has consequences for how each of us is treated in unnumberable ways during our lifetime (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2017).

At the core of one's identity are the notions of sex, gender, and sexuality in the US. It is difficult for us to change our ideas regarding and feelings about sex, gender, and sexuality. This chapter is designed to encourage you (1) to reflect in your personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases related to gender, sex, and sexual orientation, (2) to think about what is "normal" or what is moral, and (3) to examine your own cultural context influences perceptions and understanding of gender.

## Why Study Gender

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Gender is a fundamental aspect of an individual's identity and shapes their relationships, roles, and agency. For example, in some cultures, women and men cannot socialize freely in public. In the US, women can serve in the military, but their ability to serve in combat is extremely limited. In many ways, gender intersects with other social categories, such as race, class, sexuality, and disability, creating unique experiences and forms of oppression. Studying gender will help us understand how societies construct and enforce expectations, norms, and inequalities based on gender. These insights can inform policies and practices aimed at addressing gender inequality.

### Sex ≠ Gender

Many of you reading this may think that the terms gender and sex mean the same thing and can be used interchangeably. However, the terms refer to different aspects of a person. It is understandable why Americans confuse these terms. Even before birth, the terms are misused in the popular practice of "Gender Reveal" parties, where an unborn child's **sex** (biological functions related to human reproduction) is revealed in creative ways, but always with the color blue to announce a male child or the color pink to announce a female child. The reveal is about the unborn child's sex. However, the color pink or blue assigns to the unborn child a **gender** (cultural expectations of male and female personality, interests, abilities, and roles in society).

In America, pink and blue have become synonymous with femininity and masculinity. This binary color scheme's attachment to sex and gender is so ingrained in our culture that it seems natural. However, there is nothing inherently feminine about pink or anything inherently masculine about blue. The choice of colors is arbitrary. A Time magazine article in 1927 suggested that the gender-appropriate colors for children's clothing in department stores across the country were pink for boys and blue for girls, the opposite of what we see today. The article argued that pink was better suited for boys because it was a strong color, while blue was more delicate and daintier, therefore better suited for a girl (PBS, 2018).

Using pink for girls and blue for boys to designate sex and gender is a relatively new cultural invention and only became common in the 1980s. During the 19th century, there was no strict

color differentiation for gender. Both girls and boys wore white dresses, a practice born out of convenience, not as a way to characterize a child as masculine or feminine. Dressing a boy or girl in a white dress made it easy to change a soiled diaper or undergarments, and was easy to bleach. In fact, "it was the fashion that young boys should wear dresses until they were about six or seven when they would also receive their first haircuts" (PBS, 2018).

The change to pink for girls and blue for boys was influenced by marketing and the desire by companies to sell more consumer goods. Particular colors for each gender would ensure companies made more money because parents would need to buy new clothing according to the gender of their child instead of reusing or handing down unisex clothes. Furthermore, around 1985 ultrasound technology had advanced to allow parents to determine the sex of their unborn child and to purchase products geared to the sex and gender the child (PBS, 2018). Click on the following link to watch a nine-minute video on how pink became a color for girls and blue a color for boys: <https://www.pbs.org/video/why-was-pink-for-boys-and-blue-for-girls-6ikwzr/> .

While discussing gender as a cultural construction, students often cite examples from the nonhuman animal kingdom as evidence that male and female traits are biological and innate. They argue, for example, that by nature, males are larger and more aggressive; by instinct, they protect and provide for the females and their offspring. Likewise, it is natural for the female to care for the offspring and docilely await the approach of a potential mate for reproduction. However, nature is also plentiful with species that counter the above examples of believed "natural" male and female roles and behavior. Female spotted hyenas are larger and physically stronger than males. The females are in charge and head the group during conflicts over territory. While lions are physically larger, it is the females that do the majority of the hunting, and it is also the lionesses that protect the offspring and territory.

It will become clear as we move through the chapter that the concepts and practices of gender, sex, and sexual orientation that we feel are natural in the US are not biological or innate characteristics. Instead, they are social and cultural constructs of our own making, like pink for girls and blue for boys at a "Gender Reveal" party. This chapter will use ethnographic data from around the world, from the present and the past, to identify how gender, sex, and sexual orientation vary across different societies and cultures.

## The Male-Female Dichotomy

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The **male-female dichotomy** refers to the binary opposites - male or female, man or woman, homosexual or heterosexual - that dominate gender ideology in the US. These binary opposites are ubiquitous in our society, and there are strong taboos in place against going against this binary. Bathrooms are a prime example of a cultural practice that institutes and strengthens these binaries. It is also an example of how trying to go against the taboo meets extreme resistance.

Over the last decade, there have been calls to create gender-neutral bathrooms or allow transgender individuals to use the bathroom based on the gender they identify with, not the sex assigned at birth. In response to these attempts, US states are enacting bills that require public agencies to indicate that multiple occupancy restrooms, showers, and changing areas must be used according to the sex listed on a person's birth certificate (Kennedy, 2019).

The idea of gender-specific bathrooms is a relatively new construct in our history. The first separate toilets for men and women in the US were seen in 1887 in Massachusetts. It was the first American state to legislate the provision of a women's bathroom in workplaces with female employees (Kogen, 2010). By the 1920s, most states had passed similar laws.

Where did this law to separate men and women come from? It is not based on biological differences that affect how bathrooms are used (Kogen, 2007). The policies arose due to "social anxieties about women's places in the world" (Rhodan, 2016). Despite the emergence of women in the workplace, it was believed that a "woman's place was in the home" and that women are inherently the weaker sex who need protection from the "harsh realities of the public sphere" (Rhodan, 2016). Based on these beliefs, separate facilities were introduced in nearly every aspect of society. Libraries created women's reading rooms, separate train carriages were designated for women traveling alone, and with this law, separate restrooms (Rhodan, 2016).

### *Intersex*

Many people are unaware that 1-2 percent of the population are born intersex; a percentage comparable to the number of children born with red hair. There are many possible differences in genitalia, hormones, reproductive or sexual anatomy, or chromosomes which do not fit

neatly into the binary sex categories, that is male/female, into which people are typically assigned at birth (Cohen 2021). People who are intersex have reproductive or sexual anatomy that is not exclusively male or female (binary) sex classification. Intersex can refer to conditions related to an individual's X and Y chromosomes. An individual who is intersex is not born with 46, XX or 46, XY combinations, but is born with a combination of XO, XXX or XXY chromosomes. Moreover, some individuals may have a mixture of cells with different chromosomal patterns, leading to a condition known as mosaic intersex. One example is Klinefelter syndrome which occurs one in 1,000 births. An individual with Klinefelter Syndrome, is born with 47, XXY chromosomes and has a small penis and testes, low androgen secretion, and possible female breast development. Another example is Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome who have XY chromosomes but are partially or completely insensitive to androgen hormones, resulting in a female appearance. Intersex also refers to an individual with discrepancies in the external genitals (penis, vagina, etc.) and the internal genitals (testes, ovaries, etc.). Discrepancies can include no vaginal opening, a penis with a urethra opening at the tip (instead on the underside), or the scrotum that is empty and resemble labia. Intersex traits might be apparent when a person's born, but they might not appear until later (during puberty or even adulthood) (Cohen 2021).

In much the same way that students who have trouble with gender as a cultural construction invoke nonhuman animals to make their argument, students who find the medical term intersex difficult, also often look to the nonhuman animal kingdom to argue that humans can only be either male or female. However, science shows that intersex conditions are not specific to humans, and both human and nonhuman animals can have diverse anatomical sex characteristics. Some nonhuman animals can functionally both male and female, simultaneously or sequentially.

Often, the intersex condition offers the species an advantage. For example, there is a crayfish species in which some females have chromosome combinations but male sexual structures and behaviors and mate with other females. These unions produce more female offspring, allowing faster growth of the species' population. Another example is the clownfish. Born male, the clown fish begin his life matting with females and protecting the offspring from attack but will switch to a female once they grow large enough to produce many eggs (Berkowitz, 2022).

Some nonhuman mammals also have unexpected anatomical sex characteristics. The female spotted hyena discussed above has elongated genitalia or a penis that is as long as a male

hyena's penis, but the female hyena will urinate, mate, and give birth through her elongated penis. So, we see that biology is not binary; humans and nonhuman animals exhibit varying forms of intersex conditions.

### *How is Intersex “Dealt” with in the US*

Despite decades of controversy, many doctors in the US continue to recommend and perform “gender normalizing surgery” for children born intersex. These surgeries began in the mid-twentieth century as attempts to make intersex infants and children make their genital appear more “normal.” This idea of “normal” is based on and reinforces a binary view of sex and gender (Cohen, 2021).

While specific surgical interventions on intersex children are medically necessary, critics have argued that some US surgeons perform unnecessary and risky surgeries. Most intersex surgeries are performed before age two and can cause life-long health issues such as scarring, chronic pain, chronic incontinence, loss of sexual sensation, sterilization, inaccurate gender assignment, and trauma (Cohen, 2021). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW) the medical field “remains fraught with uneven, inadequate, and piecemeal standards of care – and broad disagreements among practitioners over how best to respect and protect the rights of their intersex patients” (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

### *Sexual Orientation*

**Sexual orientation** refers to a person’s sexual attraction to, and sexual activities with, persons of the opposite sex, heterosexuality; the same sex, homosexuality, or both sexes, bisexuality. Asexual, indifference toward or lack of attraction to either sex. The global ethnographic record, demonstrates that there are not only many different ways of thinking about sex and sexual orientation, but that change to accepted and expected sexual behavior can change within a culture overtime.

It may surprise many of you to learn that before the 1700s, Europeans “presumed that all males desired both women and adolescent boys” (Trumbach, 2012, p. 832). Called age-structured homosexual relations, men having sex with boys is well documented at every social level, even in the royal court of England’s James I and William III (Trumbach, 2012). Until the early 1700s, adult men who engaged in age-structured homosexual relations with boys were not considered



less masculine because the adult man sexually penetrated the younger boy. This action did not violate the hierarchical, patriarchal gender code governing men and women relations (Trumbach, 2012). When a boy physically matured, it was no longer acceptable for him to be penetrated. Physically mature men who allowed themselves to be penetrated (a subordinate position associated with women) and who exhibited some feminine behaviors were stigmatized (Trumbach, 1998).

## *Gender Identity*

**Gender Identity** is an identity based on whether a person feels and is regarded as male, female, or another gender. **Cisgender** refers to a person whose gender identity aligns with their biological sex at birth. **Non-binary** individuals feel their gender identity cannot be defined by or limited to male or female. They may understand their gender as fluctuating or as a separate third gender. **Transgender** is an individual whose gender identity differs from their biological sex at birth. These categories of **gender variance** are not new in the 21st century. Cultures worldwide have, in the past and continue today, accepted the existence of gender variance. Click on the following link to view an interactive map of gender diverse cultures around the world: [https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits\\_map-html/](https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits_map-html/)

## *Gender Variance and Sexuality*

**Among Native Americans: Two-Spirits.** Multiple sex/gender systems were found in many, but not all, Native and American societies. **Two-spirit** is an umbrella term used to by some Native American communities to describe individuals who identify and live as neither a man or a woman. There were many variations in Native American sex and gender systems. The numbers of genders and their criteria, the norms governing behavior and their role in society, the power (secular or sacred) attributed to them, and the path or ritual to a third or fourth gender varied. Gender variant roles were autonomous genders that combined characteristics of men, women, and some unique features of their own (Nanda, 2014). Click on the following link to watch a six-minute video Two-Spirits titled, What Does Two-Spirit Mean: <https://youtu.be/A4lBibGzUnE>

In some, Native American societies, sex/gender variants possessed sacred ritual roles and curing functions. Often two spirits were venerated for their ability to harness both the male and female spirits and were viewed as holy persons (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2017).

The Mohave tribe provides an example of society which had two gender variant roles. The male born gender variant was called **alyha**, and the female born gender variant was called **hwame**. A boy may indicate he might be an alyha by avoiding masculine activities and engaging in work and activities culturally designated to women. His parents and family would organize a ceremony to test their son's inclination to live as a woman. At the ceremony, he would be led to the center by two women as they and the crowd sang. If the boy began to dance a woman's dance, he was confirmed an alyha. He was then given a skirt, and his gender status was confirmed as alyha and considered their permanent gender identification. Alyha married male spouses and imitated the role of a female wife in dress, household chores, and sex (Devereux, 1937).

As with males, a young girl may indicate she may be a hwame by displaying an affinity for male roles, interests, and refuse to learn women's work. Hwame were considered excellent providers and efficient healers (Blackwood, 1984). They married female spouses and may have become warriors or sometimes entered specialized male occupations. Hwame might also assume other characteristics of men, such as hairstyle, body piercing, and acquiring tattoos designated as appropriate for male (Nanda, 2014). The sexual relationship between a man and an alyha, and a woman and hwame, was not stigmatized because these persons were of different genders, although they were the same biological sex.

***In Hinduism: Hijras.*** Hinduism is a religion that acknowledges many sex/gender variants and transformations. A polytheist religion, Hinduism has deities that challenge traditional Euro-American gender roles and exhibit gender variance. Some gods are male or female, while others are genderless or bigender (both male and female simultaneously). Similar to the acceptance of "two-spirits" among the Mohave, gender variance has its roots in the Hindu religious philosophy provided an environment in which an alternative gendered identity could be accepted and given positive meaning (Nanda, 2014).

In Hinduism, **hijras** (hee-drahs) constitute a third gender constructed as "neither man nor woman." They are men who are impotent because they were born intersex or underwent castration. Because they lack male genitalia, they are viewed as "man minus man." However, they are also seen as "man plus female" because they adopt women's clothing and accessories, wear their hair long like women, and imitate how women walk, gesture, and speak. Thus, hijras are recognized by themselves and others as neither man nor woman, but also as both man and woman (Nanda, 1986). Furthermore, because Hindu society does not view sex as a dichotomy,

hijras who have sex with men are not considered homosexuals because hijras are not considered males.

Hijras leave home and become part of a hijra community. Leaving home signals their renunciation of their caste position and kinship obligations. A hijra is initiated into a community by a guru, who teaches the new member the hijra ways of life (Gettleman, 2018). Traditionally, hijras were entertainers at weddings and at the birth of a male child. They would sign, dance, and bless the couple or child with fertility and prosperity. Hindus believe that the nature of their third gender grants them incredible religious power. In return for the blessings, the hijra would receive payments of money, sweets, and cloth.

***Gender Variance, Christianity, and Colonialism: Heteronormativity*** refers to the Western social norm, or assumption, that heterosexuality and a gender binary are “natural,” ideal, and superior to any other gender/sex/sexual orientation formulation. Heterosexuality and a gender binary are normalized and legitimated in a society through cultural practices, values, and norms. Heteronormativity can be indirect or implicit. School uniform codes that require girls wear skirts and boys wear pants are indirect as is a teacher’s seating plan that organizes their students by sex - boy, girl, boy, girl. At other times heteronormativity can be direct or explicit. For example, in the case of the European colonialism and Christian missionaries insisted that those conquered and colonized change their cultural and religious practice to be consistent with Western and Christian heteronormative sex and gender practices.

European explorers to North America in the 15th-17th centuries arrived holding Christian beliefs that regarded the behavior and sexual activity of two-spirits as an unnatural and a heinous crime; provoking contempt for two-spirits. Along with their search for land, gold, and other wealth, those early explorers were motivated to spread Christianity and save the souls of those they saw as savages. The populations of Native Americas were decimated by bloody conquest and diseases brought by the explorers (Diamond, 1999). To accomplish the goal of indoctrinating Christianity into Native Americans' cultural beliefs, government run boarding schools designed to force Native American children to speak, dress, speak, and act like their conquerors. As a result, many traditions in the Native American communities, including the two-spirit tradition and practices could only be maintained superstitiously or disappeared in many tribes.

Today there is a growing Two Spirit movement to reclaim and revitalize traditional understandings of gender and sexuality among Native American and First Nations peoples. The Two-Spirit movement is a contemporary Indigenous movement that seeks to reclaim and revitalize traditional understandings of gender and sexuality among Native American and First Nations peoples (Montiel, 2021).

Not unlike the early explorers of North America, the British who colonized India in the 19th and 20th centuries, were shocked by the hijras and held them in contempt. The practice of a third gender did not fit the Christian beliefs of the British colonialists. In 1871 the British declared all hijras were criminals. Hijras were prohibited from wearing female clothing and banned from performing in public under threat of arrest. Yet, despite these attempts to eliminate them from Indian society, hijras survived by evading the police, continuing to have a visible public presence, and devising survival strategies persisted (Hinchy, 2020). With these strategies, they maintained their traditional rights and responsibilities at the birth of a child and at marriages.

After India gained independence from Britain, the 1871 law criminalizing hijras was repealed. Recently, hijras have regained some of the rights and freedoms they were denied. In 2014, India officially recognized third gender people as citizens deserving of equal rights (McCarthy, 2014). However, it is difficult to erase the nearly 200 years of stigmatization (Hinchy, 2020).

Unfortunately, today, hijra are still often discriminated against and denied education, employment, and housing. They are often victims of violence and abuse, harassed by police, and refused treatment at hospitals. As a result of this discrimination, hijras are often stricken by poverty and forced to resort to begging and prostitution to survive (Gettleman, 2018). Click on the following link to watch a 13-minute video on India's third gender movement by:

<http://bit.ly/2k6gAh3>. I also recommend a 22-minute video on two spirits:

[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C1865643](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C1865643) (Use your with your GGC credentials to sign into the Kaufman Library).

## The Production and Reproduction of Gender/Sex Inequalities

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Nearly all societies are socially stratified based on a variety of factors, including but not limited to economy, age, race, education, and gender. **Gender stratification** refers to an unequal distribution of rewards and access to resources between men and women, reflecting their different position in a social hierarchy. We see this play out in various ways in the US. According to the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum that ranks progress

toward equality in 153 countries around the world. The U.S. is in 53rd place, compared to 25th place for Mexico and 19th place for Canada (Reeves, 2023). In July 2023, the United States was 71st in a [global ranking](#) of women in the lower house of the legislature, right between Iraq and Estonia. And while the number of women in Congress is growing, women still hold a disproportionately small share of seats. In 2023, only 28%, or 150/535, seats in Congress are held by women (CAWP, 2023). Compare this to Rwanda who ranked number one and where 61.25 % of its national parliament seats are held by women (Parliaments of Rwanda, 2023).

Throughout history, men have held most leadership roles in politics, economics, kinship relations, ritual, and dispute resolution. Interestingly few of these positions held by men over women are predicated on possessing physical strength. We know such male leadership dominance it is not inevitable, because the ethnographic record has documented egalitarian societies throughout human history. This pattern of predominately males in positions of power forces us to ask, why is gender/sex inequality such a common feature of so many societies?

Anthropologists posit that gender stratification is a result of cultural ideologies and particular historical processes that result in subordinate status, lower prestige, and less power for women relative to men. The next two sub-sections provide examples of cultural ideologies, such as religious beliefs, and historical processes, such as medical myths, can create and maintain gender stratification in a society.

### *Cultural: Religious Taboos on Menstruation and Women's Sexuality*

Religious doctrine can be a source of gender stratification, particularly religious ideologies that espouse menstruation or women's sexuality as polluting or dangerous. Ancient Hindu scriptures note that women are highly infectious during their periods and that their bodies are so weak that viruses spew from their mouth and limbs (Greenhalgh, 2015). **Menstrual exile** is a tradition etched deeply in some parts of India and Nepal (as well as other parts of the world). When women are menstruating, they are considered impure, dirty, and untouchable. Menstruating women and girls must be separated from the home and family to avoid contaminating food, home, or individuals. They are not allowed to eat with anyone, enter the kitchen, or touch anyone, and must sleep outside in a hut made for menstruating women. These huts are often not well built.

Menstruating women and girls are sometimes relegated to a barn to sleep with livestock. If young girls, or women, break these rules, the gods will become angry and curse the home. A curse may cause the family's livestock to die or a family member to become ill. The unsanitary conditions in the menstrual huts make women vulnerable to diarrhea, pneumonia, and respiratory diseases. Also, most huts lack doors and are located in secluded areas. Some women report suffering snakebites and physical assault while in the hut (Pathak, 2021).

In Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, menstruating women are considered ritually unclean and contaminated. During menstruation, they are not separated or secluded from the home but should not touch a man, or he will also become ritually impure. After menstruation, women must immerse themselves for a purifying bath, in a **mikvah**, to cleanse themselves.

Early Christianity believed women's sexuality to be dangerous. So dangerous that men needed protection from possible contamination. In the 15th – 18th century, this belief that women's sexuality was dangerous contributed to the witch hunts by Christians in Europe and colonial America. One of the dominant beliefs about witches was that they indulged in wild sexual orgies and had intercourse with the devil (Bonvillian, 2021).

Islamic doctrine shared this fear of women's sexuality and the need to protect men from it. Like Judaism and Christianity, not all practice Islam the same. The custom of **purdah**, or seclusion of women, is practiced among orthodox Islam. Ideally, a woman should be secluded in her home, particularly in separate quarters, away from contact with men. If she appears in public, she must be veiled and not display any part of her body (Bonvillian, 2021).

### *Historical: Medical Care Disparities Between Men and Women*

Medical myths about gender roles and behavior were constructed as facts before medicine became an evidence-based science. These myths go back as far as Greece. The writers of the Hippocratic Croups (the foundation of Western medicine) spoke of women as inexperienced and ignorant of their bodies and illnesses (Cleghorn, 2021). In the 17th century, hysteria (from hystera, the Greek word for womb) began to emerge as an explanation for a variety of symptoms and illnesses in women. In the 19th century, female hysteria became a common diagnosis for women's symptoms and was listed and discussed in medical texts (Cleghorn, 2021).

These myths about the female body and illness continue to negatively impact women's care, treatment, and diagnosis today. Women's pain is much more likely to be seen as having an emotional or psychological cause rather than a bodily or biological one. Much research shows that healthcare providers continue to dismiss a woman's expressed degree of pain or the complaint's seriousness. For example, in 2022, the Journal of the American Heart Association reported that women who visited emergency departments with chest pain waited 29 percent longer than men who arrived, believing they were having heart attacks (Banco et al., 2022). An analysis of 981 emergency room visits showed that women with acute abdominal pain were up to 25 percent less likely than men to be treated with powerful opioid painkillers (Chen et al., 2008).

Women are still being diagnosed with hysteria. A systematic literature review found that “men in chronic pain tend to be regarded as “stoic” while women are more likely to be considered “emotional” and “hysterical” and accused of “fabricating the pain” (Samulowitz et.al 2018). Another study showed “that middle-aged women with chest pain and other symptoms of heart disease were twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mental illness compared with men who had the same symptoms” (Maserejian 2009). Similarly, Crook and Tunks (1990) found that women with chronic pain conditions are more likely to be wrongly diagnosed with mental health conditions than men and prescribed psychotropic drugs, as doctors dismiss their symptoms as hysterics.

Physicians once believed that women’s nerves were too highly strung for them to obtain formal education because their ovaries would become inflamed if they read too much. Unfortunately, such myths are still current in societies where menstruation and menopause are perceived by many as valid reasons why women should not hold positions of political power (Cleghorn WSG June 2021).

## Case Study/Ethnographic Vignette

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By Adriauna “Auna” Benjamin

In May of 2023, the Anti-Homosexuality Act was passed in Uganda, threatening the lives of many LGBTQ+ individuals. Signed by President Yoweri Museveni, the bill introduced higher sentences and proposed that a person could be put to death for same-sex acts. More specifically, the Anti Homosexuality Act targets those for “aggravated homosexuality.” This is when a person commits a same-sex act with a minor, family member, or a disabled person. The

same range of sentencing, ten-years to life, can be applied if an “aggressor” has HIV. Taking a step even further, those who are seen as promoting homosexuality are also at risk of receiving jail time with the highest sentencing being a 20-year prison term. This legislation not only threatens members of the LGBTQ+ community but also the livelihoods of reporters and journalists in Uganda who seek to talk about this topic. To dissuade homosexuality from being prevalent in this East African country, the newly introduced anti-gay law advocates for citizens to report people suspicious of engaging in same-sex acts—effectively putting many gay Ugandans at risk of discrimination and violence.

As said by ethnographic researcher, Kristen Cheney, “The persecution of homosexuals in Africa by those in power is thus nothing new...” Uganda has had a long history of mistreating this group of people. Africa, in the modern era, has long denounced homosexuality, claiming it as “un-African” with some viewing it as “behavior imported from abroad and not a sexual orientation “(Muhumuza). The content of this law that passed in May has been brought up before in 2009. It was axed after the international community expressed their opposition towards the bill’s blatant disregard of human rights to the LGBTQ+ community. Before that, there have been laws that criminalized same-sex acts, giving “offenders” jail time like sodomy laws in the 1950 penal code and Uganda’s constitution in 1955. After the proposal of the 2009 bill, a new wave of hatred towards this group began and spread to other countries across the continent, and ultimately gained enough traction for the Anti-Homosexuality Act to be passed 12 years later.

Homophobia in Africa is fueled by religion, fertility, and “traditionalism.” The dominant religions in Uganda are Islam and Christianity, both of which condemn homosexuality and view it as a grave sin. They view this behavior as deviant because it does not conform to the typical heterosexual union between a man and woman. Religious Ugandan figures often display their disdain and play a big role in influencing the public views, creating moral panic. Uganda used to boast its place as a country with the second highest fertility rate because it is seen as an important aspect of a country’s social stability. Those who vehemently oppose homosexuality fear that unions between people of the same sex will mean a smaller number of children in future generations that will grow up to become the next leaders of their nation, but these fears hold no basis. Finally, traditionalism in Africa plays a big part in this movement against homosexuality. Traditionalism in a post-colonial Africa weave both religion and reproduction together while adhering to the standards and morals of Christianity brought by missionaries in the latter half of the 1800s. Though some Ugandans view homosexuality as a western



imposition, it existed in Africa before colonialism and only changed as the ideas by missionaries that erased and criminalized sexual diversity.

## Chapter Summary

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By Adriauna “Auna” Benjamin

Gender is often misunderstood as an innate characteristic or directly linked to a person's biological sex. However, this is a misconception. Gender is a socially and culturally constructed concept that shapes the expectations of males and females. It is not the same as a person's sex. In the United States, gender includes both men and women. However, in other cultures, there are additional genders recognized, such as the hijras in Hinduism, who do not identify as either man or woman, and the two-spirits of the Mohave, who identify as both masculine and feminine. In every community, each gender has a specific role to play and is expected to fulfill certain expectations based on gender.

As previously mentioned, gender comes with various roles, expectations, and norms, which differ across cultures. In the United States, gender stereotypes have traditionally linked girls to feminine interests, such as wearing pink, being meek, subservient, quiet-natured, and being caregivers. At the same time, boys are associated with masculinity, like wearing blue, playing with toy soldiers, and being assertive in their spheres of influence. These expectations persist into adulthood, with specific careers and activities dominated by either men or women. Beauty pageants, for instance, are commonly thought of as only for women in the US, but in Niger, Woodaabe men are the participants. This example underscores how gender roles and expectations can vary significantly across cultures.

Gender identity refers to how a person sees their gender and associates themselves with it, whether female, male or another gender. These categories of gender variance, like cisgender, non-binary, and transgender, fluctuate from culture to culture and are not new inventions but have long existed. The two-spirit, a gender variance among some Native American cultures, is highly respected and considered holy because of their religious significance to their communities. Through time and across the globe, gender variance identifications like hijras, hwame, and alyha are widely accepted and recognized.

Throughout history, migration has brought people to various parts of the world, each bringing their own unique ideals. While some cultures accepted gender differences, colonizers in the

1800s rejected and looked down upon them. In the US, the two-spirit tradition dwindled as Native Americans were indoctrinated by the beliefs of Christian missionaries, and in India, the hijras suffered harassment, discrimination, and criminalization. Though they have experienced violence and scorn, both gender variances are practiced today despite movements that tried to erase their traditions.

## Key Words

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alyha	Gerewol	non-binary
cisgender	heteronormativity	pardah
gender	hijras	sex
gender Identity	hwame	sexual orientation
gender role	intersex	transgender
gender stereotypes	male-female dichotomy	two-spirit
tender stratification	menstrual exile	
gender variance	mikvah	

## Comprehension Questions

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1. Explain how gender and sex are different? How would you teach a friend that gender is a social and cultural construct rather than a biological or innate characteristic
2. Using your own society, give an example of a gender role, gender stereotype, and gender stratification.
3. What is intersex? How often does it occur in a population and how is it most often “dealt” with in the US?
4. Using the examples in the chapter explain what gender variance means and how a cultures ethos can play a role in the acceptance or rejection of gender variance.
5. Explain how gender stratification is a result of cultural ideologies and particular historical processes that impose a lower status, prestige, and power on women rather than men.

## Critical Thinking and Engagement Questions

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1. How might a person's gender experience be shaped by their cultural context? Provide specific examples from different cultures to support your argument.
2. Gender inequalities are reproduced and performed in many different ways in daily life. Identify examples of these inequalities in the following: (1) advertising, (2) sports, (3) language, (4) cooking, and (5) shopping at a mall? At the same time, these inequalities are often challenged by both men and women. Describe examples of such challenges in the same five contexts?
3. Watch Zainab Salbi's documentary, *India's Third Gender Movement*: <http://bit.ly/2k6gAh3>. What do the lives of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Madhu Kinnar say about gender and Hinduism in an Indian context? What is similar about their stories and what is different?
4. In what ways do gender identities and expressions challenge traditional binary categorizations (male/female) in certain cultures? What insights can this offer into the fluidity of gender across societies?
5. Discuss the impact of globalization on gender experiences across cultures. How have Western ideals of gender roles influenced non-Western societies, and how have local cultures responded to these influences?

## Resource Links

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### God Loves Uganda

This film explores the role of the American Evangelical movement in fueling Uganda's turn towards biblical law and the proposed death penalty for homosexuality. Available through GGC Kaufman Library: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/119001?vp=ggc>

### Le Petite Fille

7-year-old Sasha has always known she was a little girl, even though she was born a boy. As society fails to treat her like the other children her age – in her daily life at school, dance lessons or birthday parties – her supportive family leads a constant battle to make her difference understood and accepted. Link to trailer: [https://youtu.be/JWRbzD\\_gXD0](https://youtu.be/JWRbzD_gXD0)

### Thinking Pink, Centuries Before Barbie

Long before it became a symbol of femininity, the color had both spiritual and fashion appeal.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/thinking-pink-centuries-before-barbie-a0efbff1>

### **Harmful Surgery on Intersex Children**

Despite decades of controversy over the procedures, doctors operate on children's gonads, internal sex organs, and genitals when they are too young to participate in the decision, even though the surgeries could be safely deferred: <https://youtu.be/KeAVdOJOOfKk>

### **A Journey of Pain and Beauty: On Becoming Transgender in Indian**

Born a boy biologically and given the male name Abhijit, Aher grew up in a middle-class neighborhood of Mumbai, India. The son of a single mother who nurtured a love of dance, Aher would watch enthralled as she performed: <http://n.pr/2hUWxF1>

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