

Gender and sex are often used interchangeably. Cross-cultural ethnographic evidence shows how gender does not necessarily have a biological basis.

Questions about nature and nurture emerge in discussing human sex-gender roles and sexuality. Sex refers to a set of biological attributes in humans and animals. It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features, including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy.

The biological nature of men and women [should be seen] not as a narrow enclosure limiting the human organism but rather as a broad base upon which various structures can be built. (Friedl 1975, p. 6) Sex differences are biological, but gender encompasses all the traits a culture assigns to and inculcates in males and females. Gender, in other words, refers to the cultural construction of whether one is female, male, or something else. Given the “rich and various constructions of gender” within cultural diversity, Susan Bourque and Kay Warren (1987) note that the same images of masculinity and femininity do not always apply. For instance, Transgender is a social category that includes individuals who may or may not contrast biologically with ordinary males and females.

According to the WHO (2022), Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic disparities. Gender-based discrimination intersects with other discrimination factors, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others. This is referred to as intersectionality.

Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the other biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs. Gender and sex are related to but different from gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s physiology or designated sex at birth.

Gender influences people’s experience of and access to healthcare. How health services are organised and provided can limit or enable a person’s

access to healthcare information, support and services and the outcome of those encounters. Health services should be affordable, accessible and acceptable to all, and they should be provided with quality, equity and dignity. Gender inequality and discrimination women and girls face put their health and well-being at risk. Women and girls often face more significant barriers to accessing health information and services than men and boys. These barriers include restrictions on mobility; lack of access to decision-making power; lower literacy rates; discriminatory attitudes of communities and healthcare providers; and lack of training and awareness amongst healthcare providers and health systems of the specific health needs and challenges of women and girls.

Harmful gender norms – especially those related to rigid notions of masculinity – can negatively affect boys' and men's health and well-being. For example, specific images of masculinity may encourage boys and men to smoke, take sexual and other health risks, misuse alcohol and not seek help or health care. Such gender norms also contribute to boys and men perpetrating violence and being subjected to violence. They can also have grave implications for their mental health.

Rigid gender norms also negatively affect people with diverse gender identities, who often face violence, stigma and discrimination, including in healthcare settings. Consequently, they are at higher risk of HIV and mental health problems, including suicide.