



Through the Prism of Difference : Readings on Sex and Gender

By Baca Zinn and Hondagneu Sot

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What's the relationship between gender and sex? Gender and sex can be related for some. The expectation that if you're assigned male at birth, you're a man, and that if you're assigned female at birth, you're a woman, lines up for people who are cisgender. Before the term "transgender" gained momentum in the 1970s, many folks had to make sense of their gender identity through the only concept that was available: sexual orientation. Although we now know and understand that a person's gender is independent of their sexual orientation, the language distinguishing between sex, gender, and sexual orientation has to be learned in order to be used. For example, before I knew that transgender men existed, I thought I was a lesbian.

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Sex vs gender. The term sex refers to biological characteristics, namely chromosomes, internal and external sex organs, and the hormonal activities within the body. Essentially, when we use the term sex, what we are really commenting on is "male" vs. "female", scientifically speaking. The sex of an individual is based on genetics, making it much more difficult to change. Although many people look at sex as "natural" and a fundamental difference between men and women, there is actually quite a bit of gray area in between, making this issue far from a dichotomy between "male and female". Due to the endlessly unpredictable nature of life, some women are born with a Y chromosome, and men can have 2 or even 3 X chromosomes. Sex influences gender in many cases, but not always, such as in cases of transgenderism, where a person's gender is incongruous with their biological sex, and when sex and gender are congruous, this is generally referred to as cis-gendered. Most females will grow up to become women, for instance, but not all of them.

For a more nuanced telling of the differences between sex and gender, I'd suggest giving the Wikipedia article on the subject which explains things much more in-depth, and one of the most important books ever written on the subject of sex is *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature*. The prism approach illustrates the varied ways that gender is constructed. In the introduction to this book, the editors offer a way to conceptualize the interrelationships between gender relations and other systems of inequality and difference. The editors invoke the image of a prism, through which different groups are seen not as distinct, but in a continuous spectrum. The prism approach illustrates the varied ways that gender is constructed relationally, and thus experienced differently. Toward this end, the editors draw from the most recent studies of women and men, especially studies of