A GUIDE TO

understanding
sex and gender

UNLEARN, LEARN AND
ENGAGE

The Red Elephant Foundation
over the past few decades there’s been a lot of debate regarding the place for trans and non binary people in society. this debate stems from a lack of understanding of the concepts of sex and gender. this primer aims to offer simple explanations of key terms and concepts.
First, let’s talk about gender and sex. To begin with, we must understand two things: sex and gender are different and neither of these things exist in binaries. Let’s first look at each, separately to understand why this is so.
SEX
Sex is the word that is used to describe a person based on their sex organs and chromosomes. "Male" refers to people born with penises and XY chromosomes, and "female" refers to people born with vulvas and XX chromosomes. This term is used primarily for scientific and biological purposes. However, there are people who are born with different chromosomal combinations than XX and XY, as well as genitals that fall outside the binary of the penis and vulva. For any definition of sex that configures people as a binary, there’re people that fall outside the binary. This may be for reasons other than chromosomes and genitals. The result is, rather than a binary, sex is a spectrum. People who exist outside the binary consideration of sex are “Intersex”.
Scientific study has shown that maleness and femaleness are the result of a chemical battle that takes place in the womb, with variations in them occurring from aspect to aspect of an individual.

By extension of this, a (good) doctor, will not treat you based on your sex, but rather, based on the way your traits are expressed. As a result, defining a person as male or female overall, tends to be pretty useless.
Thus, we can understand that sex is a socially constructed binary, created for simplicity (or laziness?) by some researchers. Another intent was to confine people to gendered aesthetics and expectations; anything outside the binary is therefore considered abnormal and needing to be fixed.

For this reason, early researchers used language such as “optimum gender for rearing” when handling intersex people. Intersex children are often subject to surgery and genital mutilation as a result; so that they more closely resemble the sex that society expects them to be. This can be extremely unnecessary and traumatic.

In spite of this, sex is still assigned for people at birth, based on their genitals, for convenience; but it is clearly by no means conclusive. The result of such conclusiveness can be quite dangerous for intersex people.
This brings us to gender. Based on the sex that is assigned to you at birth, a gender is also assigned.
GENDER
As sex is assigned in a binary manner, so is gender. Male is man, and female is woman. We all know that in society there are certain expectations for men, and certain expectations for women. These expectations can be very broadly categorized as: - the way they look: we expect men to appear one way, and women to appear in another. - the things they do: we expect men to behave one way, and women to behave in another.

These expectations have no biological basis. Hence, they are called social constructs. These social constructs existed even before the definitions of sex. As a result, sex was first defined around gender, to appeal to societal aesthetics (although now it is the other way). Some people are comfortable with conforming to these social constructs, as have been assigned to them at birth. Others are not.
What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a man? How is it possible, that some are okay with being as they are from their birth, and some aren’t?

When you look at all the men and women around you, you will find that there’s no single definition for manhood or womanhood. Some men, you might perceive as manly. Some, you might perceive as effeminate. Yet both of these men, call themselves men. The same is true with women; with some women being very feminine, and some who may call themselves “butch”. However, both of these people are still women. It is sexist to ascribe certain personalities to women and certain personalities to men. Both women and men can be assertive, kind, cruel, soft-spoken, greedy.
If we were to define men and women based on their chromosomes or genitals, then as explained earlier, intersex people would be left out of the framework.

If we were to describe women and men based on their sperms and ovaries, or on their ability to become pregnant, then infertile people and post-menopausal women would be excluded from such definitions.
It becomes clear that there is absolutely no definition for “woman” that includes every woman, and no definition for “man” that includes every man, even if they’re comfortable with their birth gender. Thus, gender, and the lifestyle and experiences that come with it, are unique from person to person. As a result, gender becomes “self-determined”.

For some people, this self-determination matches with who they’re expected to be. So when society says, “Hey! You’re a man!”, they have no trouble replying, “Yep, I am!”.

They don’t have trouble self-identifying as a man even if they’re in women’s clothing, although some men may feel uncomfortable in them.
Gender is therefore a very vague and rather formless thing, taking a new shape from person to person. By extension of this discourse, it is within reason to say that some people might not be comfortable with the gender that they’re born with, or at least, some aspects of it.
Let’s talk about these “others”. There are a number of things that cause people to feel discomfort with the gender assigned at birth. Broadly, these can be classified based on external functions and internal functions.
Based on external functions:

a) the way they look: somebody assigned "woman", may not feel comfortable looking like a woman; it is the same for some who are assigned "man"

b) the way they behave and things they do: somebody assigned "woman" may not feel comfortable "performing" as a woman. This is also true for some who are assigned "man"
Based on internal functions: the way they think: Some people feel an internal discomfort about identifying with their birth gender.

This is generally purely a matter of their thought processes not allowing them to comfortably think the same way as their peers, in terms of how they react to gendered social situations.

This may indicate that the person is suffering from "social dysphoria".

Another indication is if the person feels uncomfortable when they are identified by somebody else by their birth gender.
So Social Dysphoria can be described as the discomfort with being perceived as the birth gender. The way they feel with respect to the sexed aspects of their body: some people are uncomfortable with the organs they are born with, that are particular to their birth gender. The sexed organs include breasts, the penis, and the vulva.

This is referred to as body dysphoria (NOT DYSMORPHIA).*

The overall feeling of discomfort with the birth gender is called Gender Dysphoria. Gender Dysphoria is a medical condition; rather than a mental illness as many people tend to say it is.

*Body Dysmorphic Disorder is a condition where a person perceives themselves as having a “wrong” body, this cannot be cured by surgery. http://roygbiv.jezebel.com/stop-confusing-gender-dysphoria-with-body-dysmorphia-al-1583049920
But before we get to what the deal with dysphoria and transitioning is, let’s summarize what we’ve got so far with respect to gender.

We know that:
- Gender is a social construct that is assigned at birth
- Some are comfortable with this assignment
- Some are not, for a variety of reasons.

People who feel comfortable with their assigned gender in all of the above mentioned aspects, if not completely, then to large degrees, are identified as cisgender people.

People who feel uncomfortable with their assigned gender, or feel differently about their gender than what is usual, or choose to reject the gender binary of man/woman make up a wide range of identities.
Broadly, people who do not identify with their birth gender, may choose to use the label "transgender," although some do not.

There are a wide variety of labels to choose from based on what people feel comfortable with that include agender, genderfluid, genderqueer and bigender. Some may call themselves non binary (NB or enby) in general, which is sometimes used as an umbrella term for all identities that are not man or woman.*

It's worth remembering that not all non binary folk describe themselves as trans, not all agender folk describe themselves as non binary; and so on. So be wary and understanding so that you don’t hurt a person you are talking to. Based on the comfort of the person, they may call themselves a combination of these things.

Consider two volume control knobs, one labelled male and another labelled female.
If, for a person, things are most comfortable when both knobs are at zero, they may identify as agender or genderless.
If, for a person, the most comfortable setting is zero on the male knob and high on the female knob, and they were assigned male at birth (AMAB), they may call themselves trans women.
For the setting of zero on female and high on male, to a person who was assigned female at birth (AFAB), they may call themselves trans men.
If neither knob is zero, but the male knob has a higher setting than the female one, the person (who could be AFAB or AMAB) may call themselves trans masculine. Sometimes AMAB people prefer the term "demiguy" for this setting.
If the female knob is higher than the male knob, the AFAB or AMAB person may call themselves trans feminine; or an AFAB person may call themselves a "demigirl".
For bigender people the two knobs may be at the same level at the same time, or take a particular level in certain intervals of time. For gender fluid people, the knobs vary, and they move between any genders. Genderqueer people may be any of these things, although genderqueer is sometimes also used as an umbrella term. In addition to these, some people identify with a “third” or “other” gender, as seen among hijras. Thus by varying these knobs, and sometimes by tossing the console, a massive variety of genders are obtained, and the above mentioned ones don’t come close to fully representing the entire spectrum. But it’s a beginning.

The volume knob analogy is a very basic way of putting things. It must be remembered that gender has multiple axes that need to be understood, that involves identity, expression and a host of other things that vary greatly from person to person, so there are many many gender identities. A person may switch to different identities till they find one that resonates with them. It is a long process of self discovery for some. For others, it’s a lot simpler. But there is no shame in either, and all identities are valid.
We talked about gender dysphoria, social dysphoria and body dysphoria earlier. A person need not have to have these conditions to be trans. A person may simply reject the gender binary because they’re comfortable doing so. In India, hijra folk have done so for eons.*

The human body may require a little tuning for a person who was assigned to the wrong gender at birth. This is done by "Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)". This is done by giving the person the opposite hormone of what is secreted by their gonads; and/or by suppressing the hormone secretion with the help of blockers. HRT has several physical and psychological effects that helps trans people fully transition to the gender they identify with.** However, not every trans person feels the need to take hormones; they are still valid as trans people.
Some may experience body dysphoria due to their sexed organs, or the sexed aspects of their appearance and may require gender (or sex) reassignment surgery (GRS or SRS, used interchangeably). This can be Male To Female (MTF) or Female To Male (FTM). This is the other aspect of medical transitioning; although not every trans person feels the need to undergo this surgery. It could involve change of genitals, breast augmentation or bilateral mastectomy, facial feminization, chest contouring and a bunch of other things based on what is required.

However, some trans people are comfortable with their bodies as is, and don’t require the surgery. Thus, some trans women have penises, and some trans men have vulvas; but that does not mean that they aren’t women, or aren’t men. This stigma is very important to dispel. It is unscientific and ahistoric to classify people based on their genitals. Not many can afford GRS, and hence don’t have a choice; but they are still the gender they identify with.
Remember; gender is a social structure; but dysphoria is a medical condition with biological basis. Therefore, only some trans people deal with dysphoria. Only some gender non conforming people (or non binary people) deal with dysphoria. But Dysphoria, genitals etc. do not define gender; because gender is still a social structure.

Thus, many people undergo "social transitioning". This is the outward stuff; buying different clothes, changing to a different name, adopting new pronouns, using the correct bathroom and so on. This may be affiliated to social dysphoria, so be respectful of the person’s new name and pronouns or you could seriously hurt them. People may ask to be referred to by he, she or they, and/or by a number of “neopronouns”, which are created to avoid the gendered connotations of he and she, and who feel that “they” is too impersonal; although reasons do vary. Some examples of neopronouns are xie, ze, ey and shi.

If a trans man/masc has not done GRS, they may be able to get pregnant; similarly, a fertile trans woman/femme with a penis, pre-surgery, can impregnate. They may go off HRT for that period in time in order to conceive. It is extremely possible, thus it is not good to mock a pregnant trans man, or a trans woman for using protection during intercourse.
A person may or may not "pass" as their true gender. As a result, many live in "stealth" and don't transition due to the stigma or their living circumstances. Some struggle to pass even while transitioning; dysphoria makes it very difficult to come to terms with oneself in terms of appearance and self worth, often. So be kind to those that share their identity with you. Don't misidentify them.

Another term to take note of is the "deadname". When a trans person changes their name to match their real gender, their old name is called their deadname. Don't use it, and do not ask what it was if you do not know, because it doesn't matter, but listen to them if they bring it up. Don't discount it and tell them that it is a deadname and they should forget about it — each one is the owner of their experiences and narrative, and it is important to respect how they choose to shape their narrative and express themselves vis-à-vis their identity.
Finally, you may be surprised by the presence of the space between “trans” and “woman” or “trans” and “men”. This space exists because “trans” is short for “transgender” (not “transgendered”); which is an adjective to describe whether the man or woman (or non-binary person) in question was born as their true gender; as opposed to a cis woman or a cis man, who is born with their true gender. The space makes it clear that both cis women and trans women, for instance, are women; only with different circumstances of birth. Removing the space implies that the trans woman is not a true woman, but rather a “transwoman”; as opposed to a cis woman, who is usually simply called a woman.
At this point, we've covered sex, gender and gender identity. Hopefully we've understood by now that:

1. Sex is not a binary and not a useful term to represent a person

2. Gender is a social construct, and is again, not a binary

3. Trans men are men, who were AFAB. Trans women are women, who were AMAB
4. There are people who do not identify with man or women. They may identify with both, or neither, or nothing and there's nothing wrong with any of those things.

5. Many (not all) trans people suffer from Gender Dysphoria, which requires them to transition from their assigned gender to their true gender.

6. Gender Dysphoria is experienced by not only trans men and trans women, but also by some non-binary folk. The treatments are similar. But it further proves that gender is merely constructed.
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