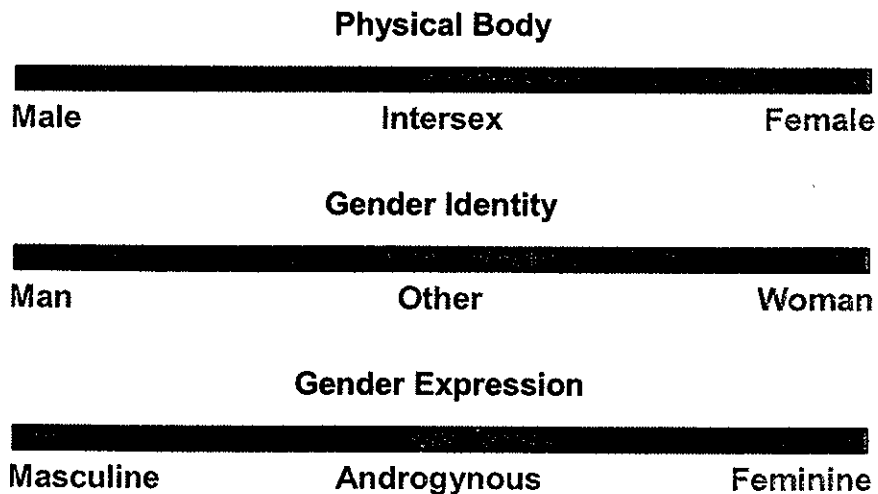


## ***Gender – Just as simple as pink and blue?***

When a child is born, a doctor or midwife takes a quick glance at the baby's genitals and declares the baby a boy or a girl accordingly. But in day-to-day social situations, we don't flash our genitals at each other (that would get us arrested!). Instead, we determine the gender of other people in the first seconds of meeting by unconsciously observing and analysing a huge number of different gender-associated cues like clothes, body shape, voice, face shape, mannerisms and behaviour. We also signal our own gender using these cues. For the majority of people, these different gender-associated cues all match up closely with the gender they identify as, but for a minority not everything matches up as expected.

It can feel uncomfortable and difficult to suddenly try to think in depth about something usually determined easily without any conscious thought. But a useful way to think about gender without causing too much of a headache is to use the following diagram showing gender separated out into three different scales:

### **Different Aspects of a Person's Gender**



Throughout history, small but significant numbers of people have found that, unlike most people, their physical bodies, gender identities and gender expressions do not all line up along one end of these three scales. For every imaginable combination of positions on each of these three scales, there are currently a number of people in the UK for whom that combination is their daily experience of their gender. Unfortunately, while nature loves variety, society tends to prefer similarity so there is often a lot of pressure, in the form of harassment and discrimination, to try to force people not to reveal any gender variance.

However, over the last one hundred years, British society has steadily increased in its acceptance of this natural variation in gender. It was once highly improper even just for women to wear trousers. Nowadays, it is no longer considered shocking or objectionable that some women will have an androgynous or even masculine gender expression in terms of clothing, interests or behaviour. However, society still sometimes struggles to accept that some men will have an androgynous or feminine gender expression.

## **Nature produces huge variety in physical bodies!**

Roughly one baby out of every two hundred born has some kind of physical intersex variation. This is where a baby's external genitals, internal reproductive system or chromosomes are in-between what is considered clearly male or female. Where a child's external genitals look different, this is likely to be noticed at the time of birth and can result in uncertainty about which gender to put on the child's birth certificate. If the variation is initially less visible, then the person may only be diagnosed as having an intersex medical condition at the time of puberty or as an adult, for example during tests to determine the cause of infertility.

Coming to terms with having a physical intersex condition can be very traumatic, especially if the person feels that their personal gender identity differs from the legal gender they were assigned at birth. They may feel very angry if doctors operated on them in their childhood without their consent and damaged their sexual function in an attempt to make them look more 'normal'. However, the majority of intersex adults will still self-identify clearly as men or as women, only a small number will self-identify as other than a man or a woman.

The experiences of intersex people highlight that everyone has an internal gender identity that is separate from their physical sex. A person's gender identity is their personal internal sense of where they exist in relation to being a man or a woman. It is currently common to use the terms **transgender person** or **trans person** to describe someone whose gender identity differs in some way from the gender they were labelled at birth based upon their physical body. Transsexual people are one of the various kinds of transgender people.

**Transsexual people** permanently self-identify as the opposite gender from the gender they were labelled at birth based on their physical body. Such an intense mismatch between their gender identity and their physical body is usually very distressing and is referred to as **gender dysphoria**. Transsexual people seek to resolve the mismatch as much they can in their individual circumstances. Most will transition to live fully in the gender that they self-identify as. Many transsexual people take hormones and some also have various surgeries to make their physical body match their gender identity better.

A **female-to-male (FTM) transsexual man (trans man)** is someone who was labelled female at birth but has a male gender identity and therefore is currently seeking to transition, or has already transitioned, to live completely and permanently as a man.

A **male-to-female (MTF) transsexual woman (trans woman)** is someone who was labelled male at birth but has a female gender identity and therefore is currently seeking to transition, or has already transitioned, to live completely and permanently as a woman.

The Gender Recognition Act 2004 made it possible for transsexual people to gain full legal recognition in their acquired gender and get their birth certificates corrected. It also gives them the right to confidentiality about their gender history. Since 1999, transsexual people have also had legal protection from discrimination in employment and vocational training. However, just as equality legislation has not eliminated all sexual harassment against women, some trans people still currently experience terrible transphobic harassment despite the legal advances of recent years.

Further information:

Equality Network: <http://www.equality-network.org>

Press For Change <http://www.pfc.org.uk>