

# GENDER IDENTIFICATION

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There has been a sea change in how Americans talk about gender and their personal identities. In 2015, Caitlyn Jenner introduced herself on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, bringing debates about transgender rights and identities to new audiences. A year later, the conversation about gender in the United States widened further as Merriam Webster’s dictionary added the words *genderqueer* and *nonbinary* to its lexicon, and *Teen Vogue* featured an article titled, “Here’s What It Means When You Don’t Identify as a Girl or a Boy.” The Associated Press Stylebook, a long-standing guide for the nation’s journalists, began offering this gender “style tip” on its homepage in November 2017: “Not all people fall under one or two categories for sex or gender, so avoid references to both, either or opposite sexes or genders to encompass all people.” In a few short years, the ideas that people can identify with a gender that differs from their sex at birth, and may not identify with traditional binary categories of “male/man” or “female/woman,” have gained increasing prominence and surprisingly broad acceptance in American life.<sup>1</sup>

## KEY FINDINGS

- When respondents of a national survey were asked about their femininity and masculinity, 7 percent considered themselves equally feminine and masculine, and another 4 percent responded in ways that did not “match” their sex at birth (i.e., females who saw themselves as more masculine than feminine, or males who saw themselves as more feminine than masculine).
- Recognizing this diversity reveals insights into disparities that conventional gender measures miss. For example, people with highly polarized gender identification—people who report being very feminine and not at all masculine or, conversely, very masculine and not at all feminine—are more likely to be married.
- The idea that people may not identify with traditional binary gender categories has gained acceptance in the United States, but the lack of recognition of transgender and nonbinary citizens in administrative records, identity documents, and national surveys restricts people’s ability to self-identify and limits our understanding of patterns and trends in well-being.

FIGURE 1. Definition of Genderqueer

**gen·der·queer** (adjective) \ 'jen-dər-,kwir \

: of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity cannot be categorized as solely male or female

*Genderqueer* is a relatively new term that is used by a few different groups. Some people identify as genderqueer because their gender identity is androgynous.

—Laura Erickson-Schroth

**genderqueer** (noun)

Some *genderqueers* see themselves as a combination of feminine and masculine. Others (like me) see themselves as neither masculine nor feminine. Some *genderqueers* consider themselves trans and others (including me) do not.

—Shannon E. Wyss

**First Known Use:** 1995

Source: Merriam-Webster dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genderqueer> (retrieved January 5, 2018).

This nominal recognition in public discourse has not yet translated into guaranteeing the civil rights of, or working to equalize opportunities and outcomes for, transgender and nonbinary people. Since 2013, at least 24 states have considered bills restricting restrooms or other traditionally sex-segregated facilities, such as locker rooms, on the basis of a person’s sex assigned at birth rather than their current gender identity.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the current administration also reversed federal guidance on supporting transgender students in public schools and threatened to reinstate a ban on transgender people serving openly in the military.

It is well known that there are important male-female differences in earnings and labor market and health outcomes. It is less well known that there are also substantial disparities between transgender and cisgender people (i.e., those whose gender identity does not differ from their sex assigned at birth).<sup>3</sup>

These civil rights and inequality concerns are likely to remain on the public agenda in the years ahead. But there is a measurement problem that, if left unsolved, will hinder all such efforts: In order to see and monitor discrimination and disparities faced by transgender and nonbinary people, the national surveys and administrative records that academics, policy-makers, and government officials use to understand patterns and trends in well-being will have to start measuring sex and gender differently.

**Making Gender Count**

The United States is behind other countries in offering federal recognition to its transgender and nonbinary citizens. In 2011, Nepal became the first country to include a third gender on its national census; India soon followed. A nonbinary option is available on passports in Canada and New Zealand, and all “personal documents” in Australia. Parents also have the option of not specifying their child’s sex in German birth registries. In 2009, U.S. federal hate crime law was expanded to protect transgender people, and more than 17 states currently prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in both housing and employment. But “male” and “female” remain the only categories allowed on federal identity documents.<sup>4</sup>

U.S. national surveys have been similarly slow to change. Not only have all respondents been shoe-horned into binary categories, but also surveys generally fail to distinguish between “sex” and “gender,” despite decades of scholarship seeking to separate biological and social explanations for observed inequalities between women and men. For example, in the General Social Survey, interviewers have been instructed to “Select the gender of chosen respondent” from the cate-

ries “male” and “female,” and the variable that results from this question is called “SEX.” Recording information this way clearly conflates sex and gender. Whereas “sex” refers to a distinction based on variation in chromosomes, hormones, or genitalia, “gender” refers to social expectations for behavior based on a sex category. When surveys conflate sex and gender, they not only ignore academic scholarship on the subject but also negate the existence of transgender people.<sup>5</sup>

Attempts to remedy these oversights in our national data systems have focused on measuring sex and gender separately, allowing for self-identification, and offering categories beyond conventional sex and gender binaries. Studies to date support a two-step approach that first asks people to identify their sex assigned at birth and then to report their current gender (see Figure 2). Additional answer options can include “intersex” for the sex at birth question and “transgender,” “genderqueer,” or “a gender not listed here” for the gender question.<sup>6</sup>

Measures such as these are beginning to be added to federal surveys, including the National Adult Tobacco Survey, the National Crime Victimization Survey, and the Survey of Prison Inmates. In 2015, a federal working group was convened to share knowledge about the measurement of both sexual orientation and gender identity, and it has issued three working papers to date. However, efforts aimed at broader official recognition, such as inclusion of a “transgender” answer option on the decennial census or annual American Community Sur-

FIGURE 2. Gender Questions in Surveys

**General Social Survey**  
 Sex: Categorical (Single)  
 SELECT GENDER OF CHOSEN RESPONDENT

Categories:  
 {Male}                   MALE  
 {Female}                 FEMALE

**Two-Step Question Approach**

What sex were you assigned at birth? (For example, on your birth certificate.)	What is your current gender?
<input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Intersex	<input type="checkbox"/> Woman <input type="checkbox"/> Man <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender <input type="checkbox"/> A gender not listed here (please specify) _____

Source: General Social Survey, 2016, Ballot 1, p. 28. Author’s survey, November 2014.

vey, are proceeding more cautiously—and some have been canceled entirely—under the current administration.<sup>7</sup>

### Beyond Categorical Gender Difference

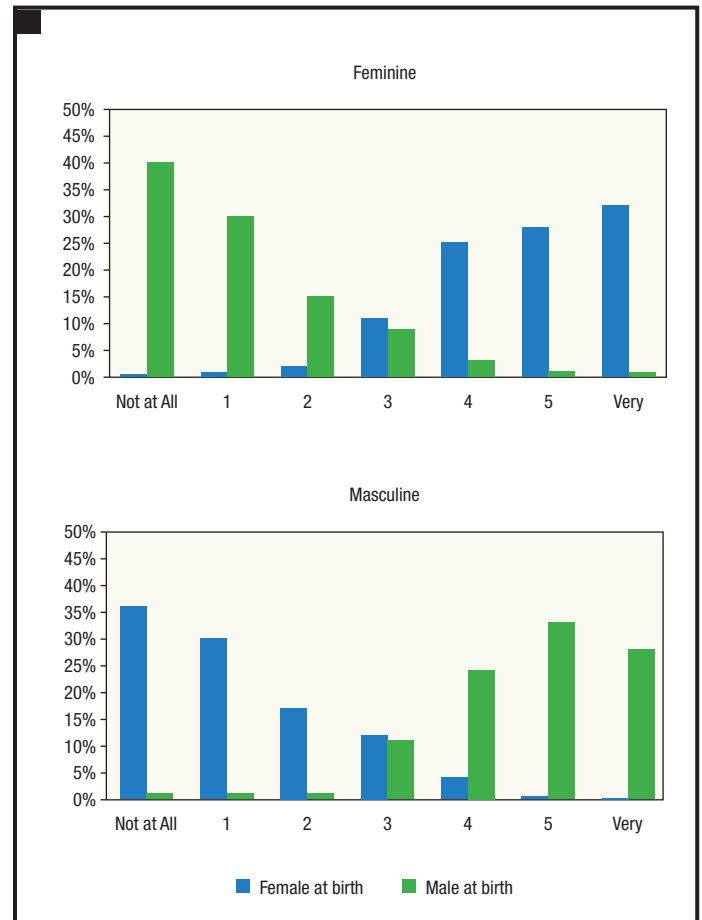
Gender diversity also exists within the categories of woman and man and within the categories of cisgender and transgender. Much like how differences in political affiliation between Democrats and Republicans are crosscut by ideological positions that range from liberal to conservative, people who identify with the same gender category exhibit variation in their femininity and masculinity—as self-identified and as perceived by others.

My collaborators and I found that fewer than one-third of respondents in a national survey rated themselves at the maximum of their sex-typical gender identification scale (see Figure 3), a result that calls into question the all-or-nothing relationship implied by binary categories. Indeed, 7 percent of our sample reported identical feminine and masculine responses, while nearly 4 percent reported a lower score on their sex-typical gender scale than on the atypical scale. The latter category includes (a) people assigned female at birth who saw themselves as more masculine than feminine, and (b) people assigned male at birth who saw themselves as more feminine than masculine.<sup>8</sup>

Although it is sometimes claimed that efforts to move beyond conventional measures are, in the end, “much ado about nothing,” our results indicate, quite to the contrary, that there is substantial variability in the types and forms of gender identification. Gender diversity ranging from equal masculinity and femininity to the most polarized ends of the scales was evident across all demographic characteristics, including people likely to be grouped under an umbrella transgender category. Older people, people who identified as heterosexual or “straight,” people who lived in the South, people who identified as Republican, and people who identified as black were all significantly more likely to see their gender in binary terms. However, people with highly polarized gender identification—who reported being very feminine and not at all masculine or, conversely, very masculine and not at all feminine—did not comprise a majority in any of the subpopulations in our sample.

Allowing for diversity within gender categories also reveals insights into processes of inequality that conventional gender measures miss. For example, married people tend to be better off financially and we find that, all else being equal, people with highly polarized gender identification are more likely to be married. This could occur either because traditional, binary gender identification makes one a more attractive mar-

FIGURE 3. Gender Diversity Hidden by Binary Categories



Source: Magliozzi et al., 2016.

riage partner, or because marriage increases conformity to traditional gender norms (or both). Other research has found that men who report more stereotypically feminine attributes and behaviors are at a decreased risk of dying from heart disease.<sup>9</sup> But again, the cause of the association is unclear: Are men who identify as more feminine more likely to take care of their health? Do men who take care of their health come to see themselves—or come to be seen by others—as less masculine and more feminine? Or perhaps there is a third factor that tends to affect both gender identification and heart disease risk?

These and other questions that are crucial to understanding contemporary gender inequality, as well as its causes and consequences, can only be answered when our national surveys and administrative records catch up to the current realities of gender in the United States.

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## NOTES

1. Bissinger, Buzz. 2015. "Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story." *Vanity Fair*, June 25; Papisova, Vera. 2016. "Here's What It Means When You Don't Identify as a Girl or a Boy." *Teen Vogue*, February 12. See also, [www.apstylebook.com](http://www.apstylebook.com).
2. See Kralik, Joellen. 2017. "'Bathroom Bill' Legislative Tracking." National Conference of State Legislatures, July 28.
3. GenIUSS Group. 2014. "Best Practices for Asking Questions to Identify Transgender and Other Gender Minority Respondents on Population-Based Surveys." Williams Institute.
4. As of June 2017, a nonbinary "X" marker is offered on driver's licenses and ID cards issued by the District of Columbia and the state of Oregon. Similar options will be available in California starting in 2019.
5. See Westbrook, Laurel, and Aliya Saperstein. 2015. "New Categories Are Not Enough: Rethinking the Measurement of Sex and Gender in Social Surveys." *Gender & Society* 29(4), 534–560. However, the conflation of sex and gender is not limited to social surveys—the definition of *genderqueer* added to Merriam Webster, for example, exhibits the same problem (see Figure 1).
6. See Magliozzi, Devon, Aliya Saperstein, and Laurel Westbrook. 2016. "Scaling Up: Representing Gender Diversity in Social Surveys." *Socius* 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023116664352>. Jans, Matt, David Grant, Royce Park, Bianca D. M. Wilson, Jody Herman, Gary Gates, and Ninez Ponce. 2016. "Putting the 'T' in LBGT: Testing and Fielding Questions to Identify Transgender People in the California Health Interview Survey." Presented at the Population Association of America Annual Meeting, April 1, Washington, D.C.
7. See Federal Interagency Working Group on Improving Measurement of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys. 2016. "Evaluations of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Survey Measures: What Have We Learned?"; Holzberg, Jessica, Renee Ellis, Matt Virgile, Dawn Nelson, Jennifer Edgar, Polly Phipps, and Robin Kaplan. 2017. "Assessing the Feasibility of Asking About Gender Identity in the Current Population Survey: Results from Focus Groups with Members of the Transgender Population." Center for Survey Measurement, U.S. Census Bureau, and Office of Survey Methods Research, Bureau of Labor Statistics; Wang, Hansi Lo. 2017. "U.S. Census to Leave Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Questions Off New Surveys." NPR.org, March 29.
8. See Magliozzi et al., 2016.
9. Hunt, Kate, Heather Lewars, Carol Emslie, and G. David Batty. 2007. "Decreased Risk of Death from Coronary Heart Disease Amongst Men with Higher 'Femininity' Scores: A General Population Cohort Study." *International Journal of Epidemiology* 36(3), 612–620.