

Gender Spectrum

BEYOND THE BINARY

10.1 TWO OR MANY?

What we learn from most science textbooks is that biological factors such as chromosomes, genes, gonads and hormones decide whether a person is male or female. Less emphasis is given to factors such as social roles, behaviours and identities most of us adopt to conform to the masculine-feminine norms in a given society at any given time. This Unit provides some information about the extent of variation that exists at both biological and societal levels. It highlights the fact that the strict male-female dichotomy ~~is grossly inadequate to characterize~~ all human beings. Instead, we need to engage with the idea of a "gender spectrum."

Most of us would have learnt that if the fertilizing sperm contains an X-chromosome, the egg will develop into a female. If it contains a Y-chromosome, it will develop into a male. But it is not that simple. Even six weeks after conception, the gonads [tissue that could become testicles or ovaries] of both sexes appear identical. The whole process of sex differentiation is not complete even at birth. For an interactive video demonstrating how biological sex is determined, see www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/how-sex-determined.html. Anne Fausto-Sterling points out that "...chromosomes, hormones, the internal sex structures, the gonads, and the external genitalia all vary much more than most people realize." (You may consult the Course website for an interview with Anne Fausto-Sterling on this topic). In this Unit we will find that there are many reasons why we need to rethink the

the binary of male-female and move towards the idea of a gender spectrum.

Most of the time, a person's biological sex and gender complement each other. (The term cis-gender is used to denote people designated at birth as females who are also generally comfortable with societal notions of femininity and vice versa for males.). However, every society has a percentage of intersex persons who are born with ambiguous biological characteristics. There are others who feel uncomfortable with the biological sex assigned at birth (male or female) and the gender associated with it. They **therefore choose to change their gender** (transgender persons) either through medical intervention or by presenting themselves, through their clothes and behaviour, as the gender they desire to be.

The process of gendering

Earlier in this course, you would have learnt about the process of socialization that turns people into men and women respectively. Often, we do not pay particular attention to this process, except around puberty when considerable physical and physiological changes take place. Let us take the example of voice pitch. You may have noticed that the voice pitch of 4-5 year old boys and girls is similar: it is very high with the fundamental frequency measuring around 400 Hz. By the time boys reach the age of 13 - 14 years, due to the effect of male hormones such as androgen, their pitch drops sharply down to around 100 Hz. The lowering of pitch in girls is not as sharp. The average fundamental frequency of an adult female voice is around 200Hz.

Girls or women whose voice pitch is much lower than 200Hz are said to have androphonia (a result of increased amount of androgen in their bodies).

There is of course a lot of variation. Some women have very low voices. The much-loved singer Gangubai Hangal is a good example. And some men retain relatively high pitch (for example, our former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and cricketer Sachin Tendulkar). Teenage boys begin to grow a beard. Girls grow breasts. All this is exciting. But it can also be worrying because there is great social—and commercial—stress on the difference. Beauticians would lose a lot of business if women stop worrying about hair on the face or arms. Gyms may close down if men do not worry about their muscles! In fact almost everyone has some worry or the other about whether they fit properly or not into the male-female moulds. We worry about our physical appearance because it has considerable influence on how we perceive ourselves, and how we are perceived by others. Such anxiety about our appearance is central to the development of gender identity which is about our wanting to be masculine or feminine in conventional, socially defined ways.

However, despite such anxieties most people are comfortable with one or the other of the conventional gender identities (the cis-gender people). Many others are not so comfortable, some of whom are defined by the Telangana Hijra Intersex Transgender Samiti as in the box on the right.

As a result of movements about sexuality rights and transgender rights, we know today that there is a wide spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations among men and women. It is important to seek out this

information because, all around us, society puts a great deal of effort into emphasizing and enforcing a strict male-female dichotomy. This enforcement may be physical (a boy may not be allowed to take dance classes or, a girl may be discouraged from wearing jeans or riding a bicycle). More often, it is ideological—in other words, it works through the mind and emotions. Both kinds of pressure come from families, schools, advertisements in print and electronic media, films and stories, and even textbook lessons. All of these constantly reproduce dichotomous views about masculinity or femininity. In doing so, they erase the shades of difference that exist in the gender identities of individuals in a society.

- **Hijra:** a cultural grouping, whereby members of the transgender and intersex communities formally enter a system of living together and support each other mutually.
- **Intersex:** People with intersex variations have bodies that defy medical norms of classification between male and female bodies. People can have a variety of different intersex variations.
- **Transgender:** Transgender people have a strong physical and mental discomfort with the gender which is unambiguously assigned to them at birth by doctors and society.

Gender is a dynamic concept. In fact, it is an inter-relationship among an individual's

- (1) biology,
- (2) internal sense of self, as male, female, both or neither (gender identity),

- (3) outward appearance and behaviour (gender expression), and,
 (4) the gender roles assigned to males and females in a given society.

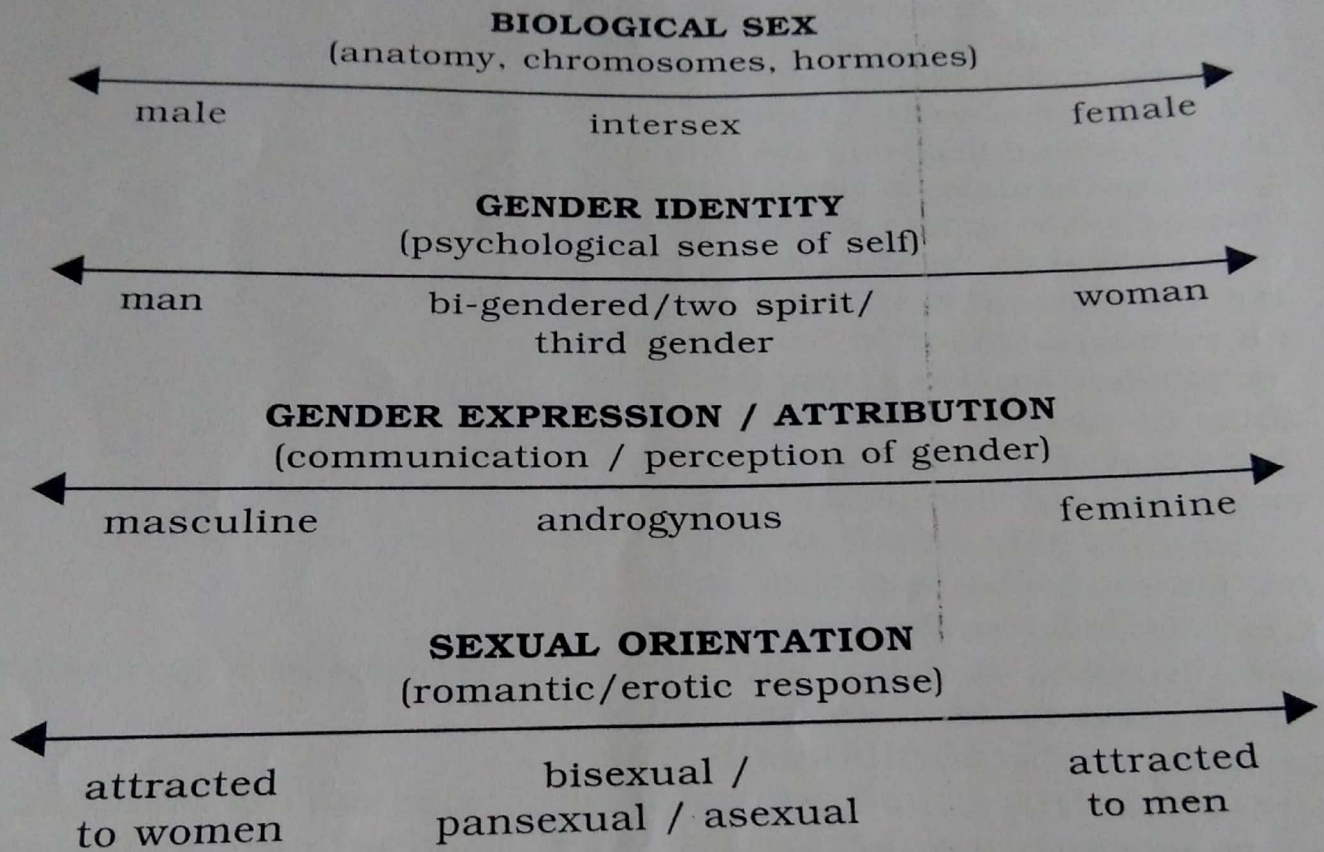
So we can see that, as a concept, gender is extremely complex. But, generally, we do not investigate this complexity scientifically and rationally. We simply take it for granted, especially since we are bombarded by messages about gender in our everyday world. For instance, such messages about gender can be found in the toys boys and girls are encouraged to play with, the clothes they are expected to wear, the kind of domestic chores they are asked to participate in, the professions they are expected to pursue, the games they are permitted to play, in the language used to refer to males and females and so on.

Examine the word lists below:

In the early 1970's, psychologists and sociologists tried to come up with femininity scores. The words in the table below were taken from one such experiment. However, researchers realized that such efforts are pointless. Many people possess both the qualities that are conventionally regarded as either male or female. We can see from all these that what we in fact deal with, on an everyday basis, is not a dichotomy but rather a spectrum of genders. Study the figure provided: you may consult [http:// www.gender_spectrum.org](http://www.gender_spectrum.org) for more information.

The main point of this Unit so far is to note that our understanding of sex and gender has to be very flexible to account for reality.

Feminine	Masculine	Neither
Shy	Self reliant	Conscientious
Affectionate	Athletic	Adaptable
Loyal	Assertive	Truthful
Compassionate	Forceful	Secretive
Soft-spoken	Analytical	Inefficient
Loves children	Ambitious	Tactful
Yielding	Decisive	Has leadership qualities
Sympathetic	Competitive	Conventional
Sensitive	Willing to take risks	Cheerful
Helpful	Aggressive	Jealous

Diagram of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender

10.2 STRUGGLES WITH DISCRIMINATION

When a person's identity and/or sexual orientation is not in line with those associated with the biological sex (male vs. female), such a person is subjected to discrimination. Let us read a little more about the gender spectrum in order to understand the experiences of people who do not belong to a strictly defined male-female dichotomy. This will help us relate to their struggles against discrimination with information and sympathy. Also, though most of us do meet people whose gender appears ambiguous, these topics are usually not discussed openly.

Gender discrimination: The case of sports

Maleness and femaleness are not only culturally different; they are also not even biologically stable features. But this fact was poorly understood until recently, and, as a result, athletes regularly faced discrimination and injustice of different kinds. However, gender verification tests were suspended in the Olympic Games in 2000. This was done after enough evidence had emerged that what was called "atypical chromosomal variations" are not atypical at all. This is true of certain hormone levels as well. On the contrary, such variations are so common that it is impossible to judge whether a person is male or female on the basis of gender tests alone.

Despite this, the Sports Authority of India, following the guidelines of the International Olympic Committee, continues to have a policy that says female athletes with high levels of natural testosterone ("female hyper-androgenism") possess an unfair

advantage over other female competitors in view of their enhanced masculine endowments (for example, stronger muscle power due to higher doses of male hormone in their bodies). This "benefit," they say, must be regulated with medical intervention if the athlete wants to continue competing in female sports events. Many sports-women have suffered indignities due to such policies (read the story of Pinki Pramanik and of Santhi Soundarajan on the next page) and faced humiliation. Sports authorities continue to work with the assumption that there are only two sexes: males and females. Thus the Olympic Committee retained a policy of "suspicion-based testing" on a case-by-case basis as did other sports bodies. This policy at different times resulted in two other women athletes being disqualified after winning medals: the South African Caster Semenya (see Course website for details of this athlete) and the Indian track athlete, Santhi Soundarajan – because they failed "gender-tests."

Pinki Pramanik

Pinki Pramanik (born 10 April 1986 in Purulia) is an Indian track athlete who won several medals for her performance both at home and abroad right from the age of 17 years.

In 2012, there was a complaint of sexual assault filed by her female friend. It led to some medical tests to determine her gender. Initial tests claimed her to be a male but further tests remained inconclusive about her gender. Nonetheless, Pinki was initially charged for rape, impersonation, cheating, assault, and intimidation. However, later, Calcutta high court dropped all the

charges and eventually she was declared to be a woman.

Pinki disagreed with the results of the gender tests stating: "I am not a male.

I have always been female. I look more male now because, as part of my training to compete in international athletics, I used to be regularly administered testosterone injections like other female participants. I was told that it was necessary to take these and I never questioned whether these were legal or not because I was focusing on winning and did whatever I was asked to do by my trainers...after that my voice became deeper and I grew more body hair...I was once manhandled and kept in a men's cell in a jail." An attempt was also made to cheat her out of a piece of land granted to her by the WestBengal Government for her performance in the South-Asian and Asian games.

Santhi Soundarajan

Born into a Dalit family in Kathakkurichi of Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu in April 1981, Santhi Soundarajan is a track and field athlete. She is a winner of 11 international awards and over 50 national awards and the first Tamil woman to have won at the Asian games. Soon after winning a silver medal in the women's 800 meters race in the 2006 Asian Games held at Doha, she had to undergo a sex test that revealed that Santhi does not possess some sexual characteristics of a woman.

For this reason she was stripped of the silver medal.

"I am treated as an outcast and therefore I am unable to go out of my house. I was shunned by my own local community after being stripped of the silver medal and I was banned from competing by the Indian Olympic association...it is unfair to determine the quality of people based on chromosome tests...it is unethical and biased. It is a humiliating experience for me and my family."

Media reports said that she was born with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), a condition in which affected people are genetically male, while possessing external female genitalia. This means that Santhi was identified by her family as a girl at birth and was brought up as such. Santhi too always considered herself a female. Neither she nor her family was aware of the genetic variation.

In September 2007 Soundarajan was reported to have attempted suicide by consuming poison, but luckily survived. Two months later she started her own coaching academy with 68 students besides working as a daily wage worker at a brick kiln for Rs. 200/- per day.

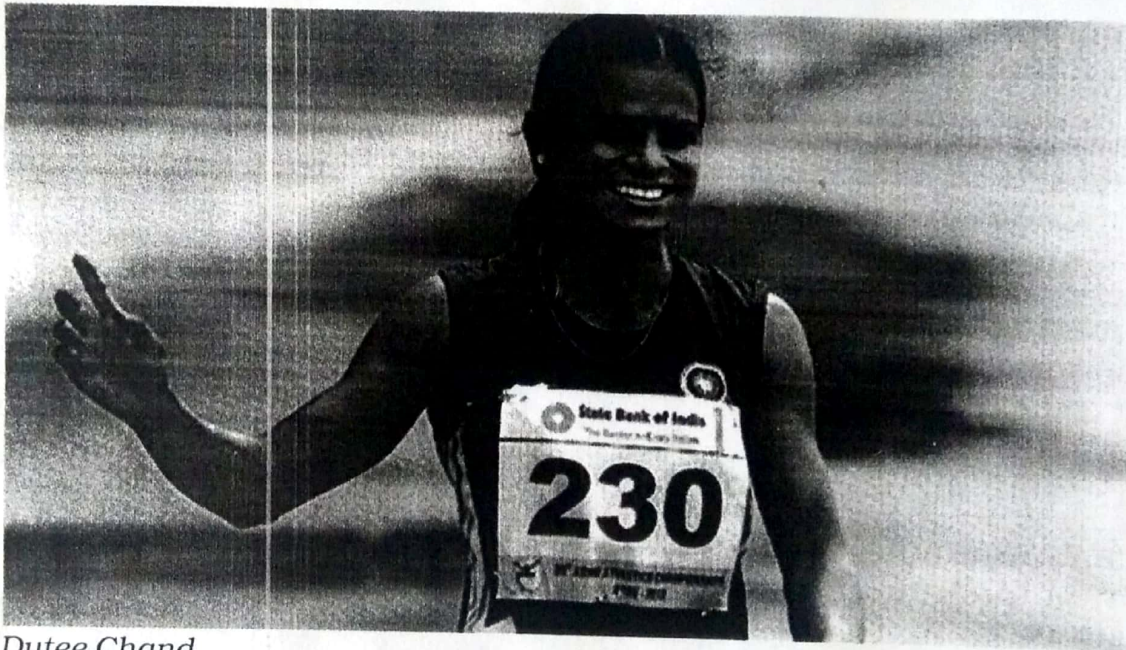
The experiences of all these athletes raise a host of questions for us today. If a body has female genitals, it is not necessary that it will have preponderantly female chromosomes and female hormones. Most bodies (including yours and mine) marked male and female in this world would not pass "gender tests" if a perfect congruence of all these three factors

were examined. The point is that in everyday life, gender tests are not routine because once a sex has been assigned at birth, most of us live our lives accordingly. It is mainly in sex-segregated activities like competitive sports that the question arises, and even there only for women, because it is assumed that possessing male characteristics is an advantage in physical activities.

Of course, women athletes who are disqualified for some chromosomal, hormonal or physical variation that casts doubt on their 'femaleness' do

gender and sports is largely derived from this book.

But such unfair norms are now being challenged. Dutee Chand, the 19-year-old sprinter became the first to do so by refusing to abide by the verdict of the Sports Authority of India. It had conducted hyper-androgenism tests on her in July 2014. When the results came in, she was told that if she wanted to compete again, she would need to reduce her testosterone levels either through surgery or with drug therapy. Chand rejected both options. Instead, she decided to challenge the



Dutee Chand

not get categorized as "men." They are still excluded from men's sports events and professions reserved for men. We do know all men do not run faster than all women; all men are not stronger than all women. This is why, Nivedita Menon points out in her book *Seeing like a Feminist*, it has often been suggested by feminists that athletes should be categorized on the basis of physical characteristics relevant to the sport (like height or weight), rather than on the basis of sex. Our discussion of

guidelines at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), in Lausanne, Switzerland. And in July 2015, the Court suspended the governing International Association of Athletics Federations' (IAAF) regulations regarding hyper- androgenism, stating there was not sufficient scientific evidence. Noting that "sex in humans is not neatly binary," the Court asked the IAAF to submit more persuasive scientific evidence within a two-year period or else the Regulations will be

declared void. More importantly, the IAAF has been asked to create a procedure where athletes are allowed to compete in one of the female or male categories and not excluded as a "consequence of the natural and unaltered state of their body." Even though Chand had to miss the Commonwealth and the Asian Games, she is now preparing for the Olympics to be held in 2016 in Brazil! Read her story narrated in her own words on the course website.

Transgender

A transgender person is someone for whom the sex assigned at birth is different from what they know and feel they are. For most such people, life can be painful and difficult. For those who have the support of their families and the understanding of friends' things may be somewhat better. Some transgender people go in for medical intervention (surgery, hormone therapy) to align the internal sense of their gender with their physical appearance / outward presentation (the change could be either MtF, meaning male to female or FtM for female to male). Many people do not pursue medical intervention to undergo transition because of the costs and the risks involved.

Transition is the technical term used for the process that some transgender people undergo when they decide to live as the gender with which they identify. The reality of many transgender people is that they are subjected to discrimination and harassment. They are denied access to housing; it is difficult for them to find employment even if they have the necessary qualifications. We should be aware of the need for legal protection for people whose cultural/emotional

experiences do not match the physical/biological sex they are assigned at birth.

According to one estimate, India has about twenty lakh transgender people. A common term used to describe transgender people, transsexuals, cross-dressers, eunuchs and transvestites is hijra. Most of them face discrimination, live in dire poverty on the fringes of society. Many earn a living as singers and dancers. Many are forced into sex work.

There have been physical attacks and brutalities on over 60 transgender people in Hyderabad alone in the last year. Hijra and transgender people are fighting for their lives on the streets, because of facing discrimination and exclusion from all jobs, education, housing and all welfare measures.

From Telangana Hijra Intersex Transgender Samiti

For more information on transgender issues globally, you may consult <http://www.tgforum.com> or <http://www.qrd.org/trans>.

Telangana Hijra, Intersex, Transgender Samiti Some Demands

1. Establishment of a statutory Hijra, Intersex, Transgender welfare board in Telangana with involvement of the community members
2. Reservation in education and Government jobs and inclusion of transgender column in Government competitive examinations

contd.