

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

What is the difference between sex and gender?

5 GENDER EQUALITY



Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to [end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030](#). As the UK's national statistics institute, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for monitoring the UK's progress towards achieving the SDGs. Part of this role includes putting the data into context. This article is the first in a series of explainer pieces looking at concepts that are important to the SDGs; future articles will explore race and ethnicity, and disability. For more information about SDGs, please see our [online reporting platform](#).

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Sex and gender are terms that are often used interchangeably but they are in fact two different concepts, even though for most people their sex and gender are the same. This explainer piece will clarify the differences between sex and gender and why these differences are important to understand, especially in research and data collection. Finally, how and why sex and gender is important for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principle of 'leave no one behind' will be considered.

Definitions and differences

Sex

- Sex refers to the biological aspects of an individual normally determined by their anatomy, which is produced by their chromosomes, hormones and their interactions.

Commented [redacted] Why normally? In which instances is sex not determined by anatomy, hormone and chromosome?

I would suggest changing to as determined by

I would also suggest explicitly stating in another bullet that sex is generally male or female.

Gender

- Gender is a social construction relating to behaviours and attributes based on labels of masculinity and femininity ([Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) Gender Identity](#)). Gender identity is a personal, internal perception of oneself and so the gender category someone identifies with may not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Commented [redacted] Similarly this should have a bullet saying that one can be a man, a woman, have no gender, or have a non-binary gender.

For most people, their sex and their gender are the same, so when asked about sex or gender they don't see a difference, and will just respond 'male' or 'female' as appropriate.

Worldwide, the definitions of sex and gender are consistent with the UK; the [World Health Organisation](#) regional office for Europe describes sex as characteristics that are biologically defined, whereas gender is based on socially constructed features, while recognising that there is variation in how people experience gender based upon self perception and expression, and how they behave.

Commented [redacted] Should perhaps be more careful with this sentence.

UK law treats sex and gender interchangeably in many instances. Neither sex nor gender are defined in law.

Essentially, nearly all people are born with physical characteristics which are labelled male or female. However, through learned behaviour people become boys and girls, then men and women. In 1964, Robert Stoller¹ coined the term gender identity which refers to an individual's personal concept about their gender and how they feel inside. It is a deeply held internal sense of self and is typically self-identified. Compared to sex which is usually assigned at birth, gender identity is not established until age three. It is influenced by a range of sociological and biological factors, and once it is established it is generally fixed for life ([Encyclopaedia of Children's Health](#)). Gender identity differs from sexual identity and is not related to an individual's sexual orientation ([Gender Identity Research & Education Society](#)).

Commented [redacted] Or have a gender that is non-binary!

Commented [redacted] Not sure about this at all! Some people's gender identity will not be established so much later. Teenagers, for example, may be questioning their gender identity and then settle on something.

Gender is increasingly seen not as binary but on a spectrum. Increasing numbers of people are identifying as somewhere along a continuum between man~~le~~ and woman~~female~~, or as non-gendered (neither man~~le~~ nor woman~~female~~) ([Gender Spectrum](#)). Therefore they often have their own words to describe themselves rather than using pre-defined categories ([ONS, Gender Identity Workshop Summary of Discussions](#)).

Commented [redacted] This is an odd way of expressing it. It assumes there is some authority doing the defining. Who is that?

Maybe change to using the categories currently employed by the ONS ?

Transgender

Transgender or trans is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth. The term trans is often grouped with sexual identity and orientation, however it is independent to who you are attracted to and should be ~~considered as kept~~ separate ([ONS, Gender Identity Workshop, Summary of Discussions](#)).

Commented [redacted] We don't keep it separate, for example we use LGBT as an acronym all the time.

Many trans people go through a process called transitioning: changing how people see them and the way they look to align with their gender identity. It can involve changing characteristics, appearance, names and pronouns, and may include gender reassignment, although the term gender confirmation is being increasingly preferred. This is the process of preparing to undergo, undergoing or having undergone reassigning their sex through hormone and/or medical treatment, including surgical procedures ([ONS, Gender Identity topic report](#)). Some people may not go on to have surgical procedures, but just have the 'lived experience' in the gender they identify as. Definitions and terms are very personal; people who have transitioned do not necessarily identify their gender as trans. They may identify as a trans man or woman, or they may see their gender identity as man~~le~~ or woman~~female~~. ([ONS, Trans Data Position Paper](#)).

Non-binary sex Variations in sex characteristics

Commented [redacted] The intersex community are moving towards this term, and it is a less confusing way of expressing it than non-binary sex .

¹ Stoller, R. J. (1964). A contribution to the study of gender identity. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 45(2-3), 220-226.

Sex and gender are both generally referred to in two distinct categories: male and female [or man and woman](#). However, there are naturally occurring instances of [intersex variations in sex characteristics/conditions \(sometimes known as intersex\)](#). This is where people are born with hormones, chromosomes, anatomy [and](#) other characteristics which are neither exclusively male nor female. They are usually assigned [an identity of sex a sex](#) (male or female) by their family or doctor at birth. Sometimes [this requires surgery occurs](#) to create a [typically](#) male or usually a female appearance; however this is [becoming often](#) regarded as unethical because the individual cannot give consent because it is usually done as a baby, [before the sex is registered](#) ([Gender Identity Research & Education Society](#)).

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): gender and sex

SDGs are a universal set of goals, underpinned by targets and indicators that aim to eliminate poverty, protect the planet and ensure peace. The goals seek to eradicate inequalities, ensuring no one is 'left behind'. ONS is the focal point of UK data for the global SDG indicators.

The data used to report on the indicators is often collected by other organisations (such as the NHS and government departments) and may not match SDG requirements. Data typically refers to people's sex, and there are very few organisations that collect data on gender [identity](#). Those that do may be unaware of the differences between the two, and may believe they are collecting information on gender but are actually collecting data on sex, or *vice versa*.

In the SDGs the goals and targets tend to refer to gender, for example 'Goal 5: Gender Equality' and 'Target 4.a: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all'. However, indicators refer to sex, for example 'Indicator 5.b.1: Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex' and 'Indicator 8.5.2: Unemployment rate, by sex, age and persons with disabilities'. This makes it complex in understanding what data is required and what information needs to be collected.

To meet the core principle of 'leave no one behind' there are eight disaggregations of the indicators. In paragraph 74.g of [Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) they state the disaggregations are: income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location, and other characteristics relevant in national contexts, whereas in paragraph 17.18 they state gender instead of sex (the other disaggregations are the same). The terms sex and gender appear to be used interchangeably but the 'other characteristics' outlined in the Agenda relate to human rights and international laws, and include sexual orientation and gender identity. This is seen as a partial success for the trans population as it demonstrates the importance of gender identity data and not excluding individuals from the benefits of the SDGs because of their gender identity. However, the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) indicates there may be a concern when it comes to reporting, especially when data are disaggregated. Even where data on gender identity are collected accurately, the amount of data may be so small that disclosure control means the data cannot be provided.

UK data collection

Commented [REDACTED] I have tweaked this.

Surgery is not required for cosmetic purposes, but can be for medical reasons.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) does not currently collect data on gender identity in any social surveys and there are no harmonised questions across the Government Statistical Service (GSS). However, data collection methodology and question designs are being explored, and work is currently continuing into whether information on gender identity, as well as sex, could be collected in the census. There is a dedicated [web page](#) outlining the work carried out and further work planned. The devolved authorities for Scotland and Northern Ireland are also considering the issue in the context of their data collection.

During the consultation for the 2021 census and a [gender identity workshop](#), it was confirmed that information about gender identity for all ages was needed to inform government policy and to allocate resources and service planning. With the [2010 Equality Act](#) specifying gender reassignment as a protected characteristic and the government agreeing to assess how to measure the size of the UK trans population, there is increasing demand for data on gender identity ([Government Response to the Women and Equalities Committee Report on Transgender Equality](#)). The [2021 Census topic research: December 2017](#) outlines the latest position regarding gender identity questions in the 2021 census.

The UK [Government Digital Service](#) states that, for administrative use, sex or gender questions should only be asked if absolutely necessary. If there needs to be a question about gender then include three categories: male, female and unspecified, and avoid pronouns such as 'he' or 'she', and use 'you' instead. In surveys, this data is required so that the researcher can amass a balanced sample of people which is representative of the target group or population. This means that the results of the survey are more likely to benefit the target group. Also, it will outline whether there are any sex or gender inequalities, and allows a comparison of males and females to assess whether there are any differences between the two groups. Sex and gender data shows the response rates of both males and females and determines whether there is a skew in either direction (i.e. whether there were more males or females that responded) and how this can be addressed. However, most existing surveys collect binary gender identity, and many surveys that claim to be collecting sex data are actually collecting gender data.

Data collection: benefits and complexities

There are many positives in collecting gender identity data. The [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) indicate people welcome inclusion in surveys as it provides opportunities to express their opinions and to raise important questions in society. The ONS [gender identity workshop](#) suggested that gender identity data would be useful to monitor discrimination and equality, and to inform policy. It would: assist with allocation of funding and specialist services; provide education and awareness of gender identity; and be beneficial to have official, reliable data about the size of the trans population.

However, there are many different challenges in collecting and reporting gender information. Gender identity is subjective, and collection needs to be more detailed than simply ~~male-man and woman~~ and ~~female~~. There are the issues of confidentiality, privacy, context, which information is appropriate to ask for and whether people would answer truthfully. Respondents need to be able to self-identify, and to feel comfortable doing so. It was suggested in the gender identity workshop that people may not wish to

disclose information especially if they were transitioning or not 'out' about their identity for fear of discrimination or harassment, or being unsure about what their information would be used for. Also, under the [Gender Recognition Act](#), people who have transitioned are not required to reveal their gender history which could make the collection of accurate data difficult.

Summary

Sex and gender are different concepts which are often used interchangeably. Sex refers to biological characteristics; gender is a social construct and is an internal sense of self, whether an individual sees themselves as a man or a woman, or outside those social constructs. They encompass many different identities and may be non-binary (i.e. not ~~male or female~~ man or woman). The ONS is researching how best to collect data on gender identity. The SDGs will look to report data disaggregated by gender identity as well as sex where possible as part of the principle of 'leave no one behind'. All SDG data can be found on our [reporting platform](#), and wider work on gender identity can be found on the [ONS website](#).

Commented [REDACTED] One might also add that in some cases gender identity is not fixed, so you may not be reliably measuring something for all time.