

## What's up with Gender? A Brief Overview

### From the *St. Paul Justice and Witness Ministry*



The World Health Organization defines “gender” as “the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed.” “Socially constructed” means understandings of various aspects of culture (usually that we take for granted) that are learned, and that vary from place to place and from time to time.

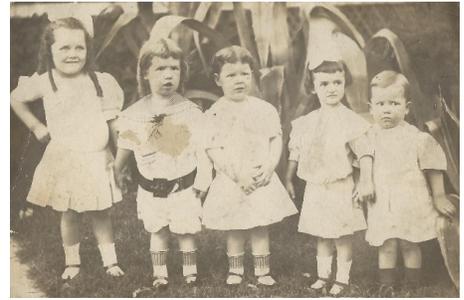
With regards to gender in the US, for example, the understanding of “woman” in Western thought has evolved starting around 1850 from ideas of women as weak and irrational such that women were property with few rights, to ideas that women are capable and intelligent such that women can now own property, have access to higher education, can vote, hold public office, can apply for credit and open bank accounts without the permission of a man, and can even be pastors! At the turn of the last century, toddlers wore dresses irrespective of sex or gender, and pink was considered a color for boys. How has our concept of gender changed in more recent years?

Until the 1950's, “gender” was understood only as a grammatical construct used primarily in German and Romance languages. Starting in the 1950's in the West, “gender” began to be used to describe the social roles of men and women as distinct from “sex” (our primary and secondary sexual characteristics). Around the world, cultures interpret differences between the sexes to assign specific socially “appropriate” behavior (gender). Each culture has its own unique gender standards; a universal standard of gender roles does not exist. For example, “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus” is an example of a US Western construct that men and woman are psychologically distinct based on their sex characteristics, resulting in distinct, gendered ways of dealing with stress and communicating. Several Native American cultures have and continue to recognize third genders (eg., the *nadleeh* among the Navajo people and Muxes among the Zapotec people).



Today in Western cultures, having to fit into one of two gender roles is a problem for some who struggle to fit completely into one or the other social category. The definition of gender now includes our private experience of “femininity” and “masculinity” or a combination, or rejection of these proscribed roles.

In our next post, we’ll discuss ways we can use this knowledge to offer hospitality to ALL who walk through our doors.



***For further reading:***

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/27/travel/mexico-muxes-third-gender.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/8-misconceptions-things-know-two-spirit-people>

[https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender - tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender - tab=tab_1)

