



Katie's exhibition *The Woman Inside* explores issues that some people may find uncomfortable. This is no bad thing: modern museums [often want to tackle 'difficult' subjects](#). Transgender, mental health and domestic violence are all emotive topics and often things that many people don't want to think about, let alone talk about. The idea of transgender has received a lot of publicity in recent years, much of it very negative, and can polarise opinions. Katie tackles her identity head on, with the attitude 'take me as you find me', and has gained strength by doing so.

Some definitions

The word transgender is obviously related to ideas about gender, yet too many people (including some who ought to know better) confuse the terms 'gender' and 'sex'. Add 'sexuality' into the mix and there is then huge room for muddle. Matters are made all the worse by assuming that all three features are biological in origin.

A person's sex certainly is biological. Most humans have twenty-three pairs of chromosomes in each cell of their bodies; one pair of these chromosomes (the so-called sex chromosome or allosome) contains X (which carries 1,846 genes) or Y types (with 454 genes). If a person has two X chromosomes in each pair, they are female; if they have an X and a Y, then they are male. Each baby inherits one of its mother's X chromosomes and either an X or a Y from its father. In a few rare cases, a baby develops with three sex chromosomes (XXX, XXY or XYY); no matter how many sex chromosomes a person has, if they have a Y, they will be biologically male. Some people with XX chromosomes develop as males because one of the X chromosomes has a gene usually found on the Y chromosome, which is rare and is found only in about one in 20,000 males.



A Roman pipeclay statuette of Venus found in Baldock; she exhibits the typical body shape of a person with XX sex chromosomes

Biological sex leads to specific body shapes, both in the soft tissues and in the skeleton. Some of these differences are very obvious: women have breasts, while men have penises. Women have a wider pelvis to allow babies to develop, whereas men tend to have a prominent hyoid bone, giving them an Adam's apple (in technical language, the male laryngeal prominence).

Gender is not biological but social. In societies such as those of the modern west, there has long been a tendency to see gender as a parallel to sex: people of female sex have the social role of women, while those of male sex have the social role of men. When we look outside the west or back into the past, this rigid system breaks down. Some countries, such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, officially recognise a third gender (often known as *hijra* or *Khawaja Sira*), where a biological male exists in society as a woman. This identity has been known in south Asia for thousands of years and is celebrated in ancient religious texts. Although we in the west may think of *hijras* as transgender women, most do not think of themselves in that way.

In the Roman world, the priestesses of Cybele and Attis were called *galli* and were biological males who dressed in female clothes. Many castrated themselves as part of their religious rituals and some went so far as to remove their penises. Roman citizens were not allowed to be castrated, and although the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) removed the ban, it was brought back by Domitian (AD 81-96). The chief priestess, the *Archigallus*, had to be a citizen, so she must have been chosen from among the uncastrated *galli*. Classical historians debate whether *galli* were seen by other Romans as a third gender or as transgender women.

Sexuality is the most straightforward of these three concepts to explain but the most

complicated in practice. It describes who people are attracted to. For most, it is an attraction to the opposite biological sex (heterosexuality) and for a significant minority it is an attraction to the same sex (homosexuality). But it is made more complex by being a spectrum, with many people experiencing attraction in varying degrees to both sexes (bisexuality) or, rarest of all, no sexual attraction at all (asexuality).

The quick version: sex is all about the shape of your soft parts, gender is in the clothing you use to hide them and sexuality is how you use them for fun.

Transgender

Contrary to a lot of the more negative views, transgenderism is not a mental illness: scientists have reported that it is a medical condition in which the brain develops as the opposite sex to the rest of the body. Although many social scientists deny that there are differences between female and male brains, physical anthropology shows that they do exist. What is unclear is if they develop in separate ways as a result of biological sex or as a result of gender roles learned during infancy and childhood.

Either way, many trans people report feeling 'trapped' inside a body of the wrong sex. Some people begin to understand this when they reach puberty, while others don't recognise it until much later in life. Our society is coming increasingly to accept that there are more people who experience these feelings than we used to believe and there are now therapies to help people cope for what is termed gender dysphoria.

If we look back into history, there are people whose identities we might now describe as transgender. The [Roman Emperor Elagabalus](#) (AD 204-222) was born a male but by their teenage years, [identified as a woman](#) and tried unsuccessfully to find a doctor who could carry out sex reassignment surgery. Elagabalus was high priest(ess) of a religion very similar to that of Cybele that they promoted above the official state religion focused on Capitoline Jupiter. This was the main reason for their murder, not their unconventional gender.



Pharaoh Hatshepsut, dressed as a man wearing the king's war crown, drinks milk directly from the goddess Hathor in a scene from her mortuary temple at Deir el Bahri

Earlier still, the Pharaoh Hatshepsut (about 1507-1458 BC) was a woman who reigned as a

king. In the Ancient Egyptian language, there was no word for a female ruler: a queen married to a pharaoh was called 'king's wife', whereas one who ruled was called 'king'. Because Hatshepsut's reign is very well documented, we can see that she was an energetic and very successful ruler who, despite being called 'king' and depicted as a man, was always referred to as 'she'. In this case, we are not looking at a transgender man but at a woman taking on a male role in a society that had no words to describe what she was doing. The lack of a word in Ancient Egyptian to describe a female pharaoh shows the power of language: the way we think is to a large extent controlled by the words we use when speaking or writing. We can see this in the early modern term 'female husband', which excited the popular imagination in Georgian and Regency England. There are some well-known cases, such as [James Allen](#), who along with his wife Abigail, ran The Sun inn (now the Victoria) in Baldock from about 1809 to 1810. It was only after James was killed in an industrial accident in the London docks in 1829 that the doctor carrying out the autopsy discovered that he was female. Although the doctors who dealt with his body and arranged his burial were careful to respect his gender identity, the press of the day was no better than the tabloids of the twenty-first century. Journalists went looking for scandal and were, perhaps, disappointed not to find any.

Gender



Boy George, singer in 80s band Culture Club was famous for what was called 'gender bending', dressing in an ambiguous way

We can see that throughout history, gender has been highly complex. Too many people today think wrongly that gender and sex are synonyms: they are not. Although sex is (more-or-less) binary and fixed by our genes, gender is neither. Our gender depends entirely on how we think of ourselves and how society will allow us to express it. In some societies, there are three or more genders, which allows people to show their identities in more subtle ways. What is called gender non-conformity (in other words wearing clothes and makeup that are thought more appropriate to the opposite sex) has always been a feature of human societies. From Little Richard with his eyeliner in the 1950s through David Bowie wearing a

Katie Wilson's The Woman Inside and Transgender

dress in 1970, Annie Lennox with her masculine clothing in the 1980s, Brian Molko with his makeup in the 1990s, P!nk with her boyish clothing in the 2000s to Olly Alexander with his sexually ambiguous persona in the 2010s, popular music has long been associated with what in the 1980s was called 'gender bending'. If we fail to recognise this as a common human behaviour, we cannot tell the full story of our present and past communities.

Come to North Hertfordshire Museum during November 2021 to see Katie Wilson's exhibition [The Woman Inside](#) and challenge some of your preconceptions about what it is to be human in the present day.

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