

Chapter 1 — What Do We Actually Mean by Gender?

Let's start at the beginning. Because before we can talk about equality, inequality, history, politics, culture, and everything in between, we need to answer one simple question:

What *is* gender, actually?

It may sound obvious. Many people think gender is the same as biological sex: male or female, based on the body you are born with.

But gender is broader than that. Smart scholars—along with ordinary people from countless cultures—agree that gender is mostly about the roles, expectations, and ideas societies attach to people.

So it's not only about biology, but also about culture.

Not only about “what you are,” but also “what you're allowed to be.”

1.1 Biological Sex vs. Gender: Two Different Things

To keep it very simple:

Biological sex is about the body: chromosomes, hormones, reproductive organs.

Gender is about how a society thinks men, women (and everyone beyond those categories) are supposed to be.

Biology changes slowly.

Gender changes constantly.

A thousand years ago, women in many societies had little to no public role. They were often seen as weak or unfit for leadership. Yet in many ancient cultures, women were leaders, warriors, or priests.

Biology stays the same; gender can be completely different.

1.2 Gender as a Social System

You can think of gender as a kind of game with rules. Those rules tell you:

- what is considered “normal” for boys and men

- what is considered “normal” for girls and women
- and especially what is *not* acceptable

The problem is that these rules don’t fit everyone. For some, they are suffocating, unfair, or even dangerous.

In some cultures, it’s normal to expect men to be aggressive, competitive, and independent, while women must be caring, patient, and service-minded. In other cultures the expectations are the opposite, or there are multiple gender roles that exist alongside each other.

In other words: **gender is learned, not innate.**

1.3 How Gender Inequality Begins

Gender inequality begins when certain gender roles are seen as more valuable than others. This often means:

- men receive more power
- women have less control over their own lives
- people who don’t fit neatly into the male-female boxes become invisible or unsafe

The result: unequal opportunities, unequal treatment, unequal value.

And it doesn’t only happen in distant places or in ancient times. It happens everywhere. Even today.

1.4 A Global Issue

Gender inequality isn’t the problem of a single culture, religion, or region. It appears in:

- Europe
- Africa
- Asia

- North and South America
- Oceania
- and even in places where you might not expect it

In some countries, women are not allowed to study or work without permission.

In others, men are punished harshly for showing emotion.

In others still, transgender people are threatened or persecuted.

Every society has its own version of inequality—sometimes loud and visible, sometimes quiet and hidden.

1.5 Why This Book?

This book isn't written to blame anyone, but to understand how gender works, how gender inequality came to exist, and why everyone benefits from making the system fairer.

Not just women.

Not just men.

Not just people who don't fit comfortably into one of those two boxes.

Everyone.

Because gender equality isn't a battle between groups.

It's about freedom, opportunity, and respect.

It's about the question: *How do we create a fairer world for everyone, without anyone losing out?*

1.6 What to Expect in the Following Chapters

In the rest of this book, we will explore:

- the origins of gender roles in prehistory
- inequality in ancient civilizations: Egypt, China, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica
- gender in religions and mythologies
- the position of women, men, and gender-diverse people through the centuries

- feminism, emancipation, and modern equality movements
- the economic, cultural, and political forces that sustain inequality
- the current state of gender equality across different world regions
- and what gender equality might look like in the future

But before we go there, we need to accept one more thing:

Gender is complicated. But understanding it doesn't have to be.

That's exactly what this book is for.