

BEFORE WE BEGIN...

... There's just one more thing. Gender. It's a complicated subject for a lot of people, apparently. Even the Oxford English Dictionary seems to struggle to give a concrete definition:

Gender (*noun*)

1

[omitted because it's solely about grammar]

2

[omitted because it's obsolete]

3

**a. gen. Males or females viewed as a group;
= sex n. 1. Also: the property or fact of belonging to
one of these groups.**

**3. Psychology and Sociology (originally U.S.). The
state of being male or female as expressed by social**

or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex. Also: a (male or female) group.
c. [omitted because it's about electronics and beside the point]

Before we begin, let's be clear about one thing: although gender is related to a person's sex, the terms *gender* and *sex* are definitely not interchangeable.

Gender is actually about *everything*, but especially about masculinity and femininity. It refers to the characteristics, norms, and behaviours of men/boys and women/girls, as well as to their roles in society and in relation to each other.

On top of that, gender is a social construct: it's not something that's set in stone. Rather, it's something that's determined by a society's values. For example, what is regarded as "manly" in Ireland, can be very different from what is considered "manly" in India. In short: gender is determined culturally, but time is also a factor. We might now find it old-fashioned that something was considered "feminine" a hundred years ago. And did you know pink used to be a typically masculine colour, and blue a typically feminine colour? Until around 1950 when this flipped, and suddenly pink was for girls, and blue was for boys!

When talking about gender, there are a few terms to keep in mind.

These terms will be used repeatedly throughout the book:

- » **Sex:** the *physical*, or biological, characteristics – for example penis, vulva, or breasts – that make a person male or female (or when the sex is neither: intersex).

- » **Gender identity:** this is about who you are, based on how you *feel*, how you experience your gender (as male, female, or neither: non-binary).

- » **Gender expression:** that which the outside world gets to see of you, that has to do with your gender. Consider, how do you express the way you experience your gender? Is your hair style, clothing, or behaviour more masculine, feminine, or a little bit in between (androgynous)?

- » **Sexuality:** the sexual attraction that can exist between, for example, people of the same gender (homosexual), or the other gender (heterosexual), both (bisexual), or maybe none at all (asexual).

Right, now that we've established that, we can continue.

INTRODUCTION

We are Mandy and Thorn, a queer couple from Amsterdam. We both work in media (Mandy as a presenter and editor-in-chief of a young adult magazine, and Thorn as an actor). We met during a sweaty night at Club NYX in Amsterdam. Mandy was wearing leopard print, and Thorn a bright yellow tracksuit. We introduced ourselves, briefly, but that was enough for both of us to make a lasting impression. And then you know how the story goes. We started following each other on Instagram, liking each other's posts and reacting to each other's stories... For six months, we didn't do much more than that. But we did have the feeling that we were staying up to date with what's going on in each other's life.

The next time we saw each other in real life was at a feminist event at the Amsterdam Museum. A photographer

asked us—two people who only vaguely knew each other—to be in a picture together. “A *little bit closer!*” he said from behind the camera. And while we were moving more and more into each other’s personal space – anything for a good shot – sparks started to fly.

Our first date followed two weeks later. Eight hours—that’s how long our first date lasted! We were talking to each other for eight hours straight, without any awkward silences. If the bartender hadn’t eventually asked us to leave, we probably would’ve stayed there even longer. Because ever since that first date, we’re still not done talking to each other.

“Shall I go with you to the station?” Mandy had asked. Thorn wasn’t going to say no to that. Mandy was on her scooter, and Thorn on their bicycle. All the while, both of us were wondering whether we’d go for a kiss when we’d, eventually, have to say goodbye.

It might be superfluous to say that, indeed, we both went for it.

Since then, we’ve moved in together, and proudly refer to each other as *girlfriend and joyfriend*. Yes, *joyfriend* instead of *boyfriend*. Because, you see, Thorn is not a man. Nor a woman. And that makes us a queer couple.

Simply put, queer is everything that doesn’t fit into the category of “normal”, at least according to society. More

specifically, queer is an umbrella term for everyone who doesn't meet the heterosexual or cisgender standard. What does that mean? Well, "heterosexual" means you're attracted to people of the opposite gender; and someone who is "cisgender" has a gender identity that matches their sex as it was established at birth. You'll come across plenty of terms like "cisgender" in this book, some of which you might not immediately recognise. That's why we added a glossary at the back of the book. And sometimes we'll elaborate a bit more in a footnote. How convenient!

Since the beginning of our relationship, we've been outspoken about our gender identity and sexual diversity. Along the way, we realised that people saw us as some sort of walking gender encyclopaedia. It's a subject area that's important to us and one that we spend a lot of our time on. Many people approach us looking for answers to their burning questions on anything and everything to do with gender and non-binary life. And we've noticed the frequency of this steadily increasing.

At first, we shrugged off everyone's attempts to get us to write a book on the subject. But then we noticed that a lot of the questions were very similar, and that there was apparently no easily accessible, conversational book

available in Dutch that dealt with gender identity.¹ So we figured: why don't we make a sort of gender encyclopaedia? Okay, the term "encyclopaedia" might be a bit weighty for a book this size, but it did seem like a good idea to put all those questions and answers in writing.

So behold: *FAQ Gender*. A book that attempts to answer all the questions we're asked most often. Over the course of this book, you should get to know us a little better and we'll draw from our own experiences to answer the *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)* on gender.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part, FAQ ME, is mainly for people who have questions about their own gender identity. This is Thorn's part. "It covers all the questions I had myself in my quest for my own gender identity. Other people's experiences helped me a lot on my own gender journey, so this is my attempt to pay it forward. Hopefully this chapter gives those who are questioning a little bit more direction, hope, and especially trust that it's all going to be alright. Because the cliché is true: it gets better!"

Part two, FAQ YOU, belongs to Mandy. "This section is for

1. We realise you're not reading this in Dutch right now. In 2023, our book got translated into English so it would be accessible to a lot more people... including you!

those people who know someone who is questioning their gender identity. I'll discuss topics like, how do you create a safe environment for someone to be themselves? But I also explore the fact that if someone identifies differently from you, that doesn't have to mean you have to make any concessions as a person. Everyone has the right to exist and is allowed to take up space!"

This part also covers the inappropriate questions that mainly Mandy gets. Questions are, of course, allowed—and we also answer them in this book. But we hope you'll see how some questions aren't exactly polite to ask, and that there are certain ways some questions just shouldn't be phrased. Sometimes something is simply none of your business. That sounded very direct now, didn't it?

Well, the second part of the book is pretty direct. If you're the type of person who often feels like, *nowadays*, you can't say anything anymore and that people should just conform to your "normal", well, this is going to be hard for you. But hey, you've already bought or have been gifted the book now anyway² and the focus is not at all on

2. Thanks for the support. We barely make any money on this, but still, every little bit helps. It does make us laugh out loud to think you are one of those faint of heart and are now holding this book, all annoyed because you were tricked by the pretty cover and snazzy title. Thinking this book would tell you there is nothing besides men and women, that it's only one or the other. That you're one of those people who thinks FUCK GENDER, all that nonsense nowadays! Only to then find out that's not what we mean by FAQ. But you've obviously opened the book already, so you can't return it anymore and now you're supporting two of those left-winged weirdos. Haha, kiss and make it better. We love you!

what you're doing wrong. *Wrong* is not a word we like to use in this context anyway.

That being said, this book might occasionally confront you with your own vulnerabilities. You might sometimes have to put your ego aside and admit your mistakes—but if you're willing to do that, you can make a massive difference in someone else's life. And that feels pretty good, right? Or even just do it because it makes *you* feel good. That's okay, too.

Lastly, we come to the third part. FAQ US. This part of the book is a conclusion, but it's also a short manifesto written to try and unite people. In this section, we give you tools you can implement immediately to make your daily environment a little bit more inclusive.

With this book, we hope—once and for all—to clear up the fog that often surrounds the subject of gender. Because to us it's very clear, now it's your turn.

Love,
Mandy Woelkens & Thorn de Vries