

Exploring the Gender-Sex Binary in ALE

Event report, May 2026

Prepared by

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About the event

On the 25th of March 2026, EAEA held a breakfast discussion on the Gender-Sex Binary, its origins and its implications for inclusion and social justice in Adult Learning and Education (ALE). The event was led by Bea Martín Piqué, as part of the [ENHANCE project](#), which explores how to amplify the learner voice in adult education through participatory policy-making. The event was also held with the support of the Gender Equality Task Force. Participants, who ranged from policymakers to learners to ALE professionals, reflected on and practiced the use of gender neutral language in different languages, and discussed how the world and ALE would be different without binary gender norms. They highlighted the intersectionality of all systems of oppression, envisioning a vastly more just world where difference and authenticity is embraced; as well as more free, flexible, and equal access to different education and work disciplines.

The objectives of the breakfast discussion were to

- Challenge our understanding of gender and sex as binary categories.
- Understand how the gender-sex binary affects intersex, non-binary, trans*, and queer people, but also women, feminism, and everyone.
- Reflect on our use of gendered language and thinking.
- Consider how this topic relates to inclusivity and the pursuit of social justice in ALE.
- Become more knowledgeable and inclusive as a result - as educators, policymakers, project managers, learners, people.



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Resilience &
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This event was organised by EAEA in light of the ENHANCE EU-funded project. This project is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

The event supports EAEA's 2026 annual theme on "Resilience and Community-Building" and EAEA's commitment to gender equality through the joint Gender Equality Task Force for Lifelong Learning.

01

What is the Gender-Sex Binary?



The gender-sex binary is a term that highlights the interdependent relation between the construction of gender and sex.



The breakfast discussion started with a presentation to introduce key ideas related to the topic, in order to build the context and information base from which to have the discussion. Firstly, a glossary was used to ensure some common understanding of terms such as gender, sex, gender-sex, binary, and intersex. Importantly, the gender-sex binary was defined initially as a term that highlights the interdependent relation between the construction of gender and sex. Sex being based on gender, and gender being based on sex.

The facilitator then introduced historical and social aspects of the foundations of the gender-sex binary, such as its relation to the construction of sexism, colonialism, and racism, in particular through the use of 'pseudo-science', as some scholars claim. To contrast this narrative, current scientific studies and positions were presented that highlight the deeply complex biology of sex and sociology of gender.

The presentation introduced perspectives suggesting (see bibliography) the idea that the gender-sex binary is a pseudoscientific-colonial invention to naturalize sexism and racism, a political choice that reduces the socio-biological complexity of gender and sex to binary categories, in order to establish social hierarchies.

Why do ALE actors need to talk about it?

The presentation continued with the link between the topic and ALE, highlighting that because the gender-sex binary is still at the core of and upholds many social inequalities. Understanding and challenging the gender-sex binary is hugely significant for ALE, which historically has focused on marginalized and discriminated groups and individuals. Following this, the question of who is affected by the gender-sex binary was discussed, recognizing how intersex, non-binary, and trans* people are fundamentally affected by these structures, but also how women, racialized people, as well as feminism and other social justice movements are affected by, and can benefit from, challenging the gender-sex binary and its binary gender norms.

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Key principles of ALE were presented, including access and inclusion: everyone has the right to access and participate in high-quality ALE and should have the opportunity to do so; as well as the values of advancing social justice, inclusion, equality, and valuing diversity.

EAEA's Manifesto on Adult Learning in the 21st Century

was quoted to note that ALE can promote the understanding and sense of responsibility among Europeans for the colonial heritage and its mechanisms, many of which are still in place, such as the gender-sex binary.



Three distinct ways in which ALE can challenge the gender-sex binary were presented, namely:

1. By conveying knowledge, drawing from a broad base of information, including gender studies, and providing concrete courses on the topic as well as including this knowledge in various courses.
2. By each adult educator, advocate, and policymaker aiming, in one's daily work, to not reproduce discriminatory structures and not contribute to the fixation of stereotypes, including those of the gender-sex binary. For example, avoiding assuming people's pronouns/gender/sex, and instead asking and introducing oneself with one's pronouns, ensuring visibility of non-binary genders and sexes in our work.
3. By creating safe and inclusive spaces, including gender neutral/inclusive spaces, from bathrooms to language.



03 Gender-neutral language in practice

After the presentation, we held an activity where participants needed to try and avoid using gendered language, being challenged to try different gender neutral pronouns in English aside from they/them, such as xe/xem/xyr or e/em/eir, or trying the activity in their native language, discussing with their peers what they know about historic and current uses of gender neutral language.

Some people practised in English and reflected on moments when they slipped up, while others talked about and later shared how gendered language works in their languages, including Italian, Greek, and Slavic languages such as Slovenian and Serbian.

Some participants highlighted [limitations dependent on how deeply gender is embedded in the language](#), examples of how the non-binary community native to that language is dealing with these issues, and how these efforts relate to feminist discourses on gender-inclusive language. This also led to a [conversation on language changes overall, and specifically about language institutions'](#) resistance to change and eventual acceptance, such as with English-based words and the Royal Academy of the Spanish Tongue, or with the development of the French language being led by previous French Académie Française. We concluded that language has always been constantly in change to meet the needs of its speakers, and arguments against changes in language are deeply political, focused on who gets to be represented in the language and how.

Discussion

Lastly a discussion was opened up, using the following guiding questions, painting, writing, and Dixit cards to first reflect on them and then share one's thoughts and discuss with the larger group:

- Imagine a world without binary gender norms. What would it look like?
- How would ALE look/be different in a world without the gender-sex binary?
- For example, consider how learning/teaching, admission to a course, data collection, safety, meeting new people, might change in a non-gendered learning environment.
- How would the way we tackle issues related to ALE and gender equality, e.g. increasing women in STEM, change?
- How do you feel about this topic?

04 In the discussion, most participants considered the gender-sex binary to be part of an interlinked web of systems of oppression, and therefore envisioned a far more just world if there were no binary gender norms. According to some, 'a world where, rather than shaped by pre-established boxes, people could live and relate to others in a more authentic and unique way, embracing difference and diversity as constants, and as sources of richness'. Participants reflected that this would also mean that education, including adult education, would be explored and utilised in a more free and individual way, with systems based even more on flexibility and equity.



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Specifically when looking at the question of women in STEM, some participants expressed the view that this is a clear example of how rather than looking at it this way, we should question not only why STEM is gendered in the first place, but also question the focus on these disciplines rather than on traditionally feminized careers such as teachers, nurses, care-takers of children and elderly people, and put attention to the need to increase men working in these areas, highlighting the gendered/misogynist roots of these divisions and priorities. We need to re-value care work as immensely important work that is not inherently gendered.

Reflections from the facilitator

"From feedback I received, everyone enjoyed learning more about the topic, particularly having a base from which to go on, both in terms of the glossary, as well as the information part of the event, which some felt was often overlooked, instead assuming that people have an established understanding of the topics at hand. They also communicated appreciating the opportunity to discuss and share their views. Everyone participated actively, and engaged with the topic with respect, open-mindedness, and curiosity, creating a clearly felt safe space for learning. Many participants asked to receive the presentation and expressed interest in continuing to learn about this topic, both by exploring the resources shared, as well as in potential future discussion events."

-Bea Martín Piqué, Policy and Pedagogical Assistant, EAEA

Sources cited during the event:

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality. Basic books.
Fausto-Sterling, A. (2008). Myths of gender: Biological theories about women and men. Basic Books.
Gaard, G. (1997). Toward a queer ecofeminism. Hypatia, 12(1), 114-137.
Henriques, M. (2016). Intersex: celebrating the beauty in difference. Independent.
Laqueur, T. (1992). Making sex: Body and gender from the Greeks to Freud. Harvard University Press.
Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). The invention of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses. U of Minnesota Press.
Russett, C. (1991). Sexual science: The Victorian construction of womanhood. Harvard University Press.
Schuller, K. (2018). The biopolitics of feeling: Race, sex, and science in the nineteenth century. Duke University Press.

Organisations and Projects working on related topics:

Let's Talk about Non-Binary (BE)
Grands Carmes (BE)
Rainbow House (BE)
Genres Pluriels (BE)
OII - Organisation Intersex International Europe (Eu)
ILGA Europe (Eu)
Resist Project (Eu)

Activists and Educators working on related topics:

Alok Vaid Menon
adrienne maree brown
Laurenzo Adesso
Capri Campeau
Schuyler Bailar
Addison Rose Vincent
Elle Deran
Matt Bernstein

Books with related topics:

Beyond the Gender Binary, Alok Vaid Menon
Gender Queer, Maia Kobae
Gender Trouble, Judith Butler
None of the Above, Travis Alabanza
Felix Ever After, Kacen Callender
I Wish You All the Best, Mason Deaver
The Death of Vivek Oji, Akwaeke Emezi



For more information on the contents of the report, the ENHANCE project, ALE and it's link with the gender-sex binary, please reach out to EAEA: eaea-office@eaea.org

