

The guide

# Rethinking *Gender* in Design

*Rethinking Gender in Design: the guide* is designed to provide open access tools and information on how to design for a gender-inclusive future. It focuses on communicating relevant information and content on gender for design practice. This includes guidelines on how to become aware of our own gender bias and how to work with gender in design. The manual includes

- \* general behaviour and attitude towards gender
- \* diversity in our population,
- \* common pitfalls in design practice, and applicable principles and techniques

Gender is a concept concerning everyone. Therefore, *Rethinking Gender in Design: the guide* is mainly designed to target all designers, but also educators, students, professionals, and anyone interested in learning more about the interplay between gender and design.



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## *People*

In every design project, it is important to account for the people who come in contact with the solution. Given the scope of design practice, it can be hard to know who will come in touch or be influenced by our solutions. When working towards a gender-inclusive society, it can therefore be valuable to account for the various attitudes and behaviours in society. Understanding how people receive and perceive our solutions can provide knowledge on how to approach the design challenge and create acceptance of gender diversity.

### **Common attitudes**

Designers influence people with our decisions, be it people within our target group and others who interact directly or indirectly with our design. The following are just a fraction of the diversity in attitudes in our society. The purpose of presenting these is to illustrate how people's attitudes towards gender diversity can differ. This can be used to understand how people will receive a design introduced to society.

### **Common behaviour**

The social forces of the binary gender system can influence our behaviour unconsciously. Because of this, it can be of value for designers to understand how people relate to this. What is the core need for people concerning gender? The following presents some important aspects of people's behaviours concerning gender diversity and identity.



Common attitudes

*Not bothered by gender*

Usual gender identity  
Cis-man

Relation to gender norms  
Thinks there is too much focus on gender

Gender identity-related challenges  
Does not experience any specific challenges with their gender identity

Thoughts on gender diversity  
Have not considered the challenges others with other gender identities experience

Attitude  
Bystander (idealist)

“Just chill, let people be who they want to be, as long as it does not hurt anyone”

*One or the other*

Usual gender identity  
Binary, cis-gendered

Relation to gender norms  
Conforms to most gender norms in society

Gender identity-related challenges  
Finds some representations of gender challenging and restrictive

Thoughts on gender diversity  
People should do what they want, but the division of man and woman is important

Attitude  
Binary is biology - biology is the truth

“You are born either as a man or a woman. How you define yourself is up to you”





Common attitudes

*The activist*

- Usual gender identity
  - All genders
- Relation to gender norms
  - Plays with gender expression
- Gender identity-related challenges
  - Discrimination, stereotyping, stigma
- Thoughts on gender diversity
  - Should be taught in school and informed about in society
- Attitude
  - Normalize fluid gender model

“You are born either as a man or a woman. How you define yourself is up to you”

*The reflective herd*

- Usual gender identity
  - Binary cis-gendered
- Relation to gender norms
  - Conforms to norms gender norms, but some can be restrictive and discriminating
- Gender identity-related challenges
  - Stereotypes and expectations
- Thoughts on gender diversity
  - All genders should be included, but is not actively conscious of their own gender biases
- Attitude
  - Moral driven - equality and equity for all

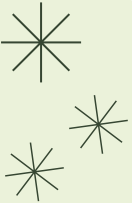
“We have to respect and accept each other, regardless of our gender identity”



## Common behaviour

### *Behaviour influence attitude*

We like to think of ourselves as open-minded. However, the binary gender system has led to habitual thinking for many. For this reason, we are often not protected by our general attitude in our specific behaviour. In other words, we are prone to resort to and express a norm conforming attitude when we experience the behaviour of others as unexpected based on our gendered assumptions.



We are influenced by our environment. When the only stimuli we receive on gender is heteronormative and binary, we consciously and subconsciously believe that this is the truth. Thus, we are prone to think of nonconforming behaviour as abnormal and notable.

### *Environment influence assumptions*



### *Standing out within the accepted*

Conforming to the gender norms gives a sense of belonging. However, some affiliations are false because the stigma in the society of crossing these norms may lead to embarrassment and other negative consequences for many. Conforming to the norms is simply easier for many.



Our personal experiences depend on a lot of various factors. Though some people are in the same gender group, it does not automatically mean they possess the same values and preferences. When this is not accounted for, such as in the binary gender model, people might displace their identity to "fit in".

### *Similar people can experience things differently*



## Common behaviour

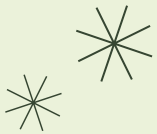
*Different people  
can experience  
things similarly*

Though the binary and heteronormative gender values fit some, and probably the majority of people, we have to be cautious in relying too much on the gender boxes. Reducing experiences to only apply for one target group, can exclude many and lead to negative consequences if not accounted for.



Because of the lack of diverse representation of gender in society, a lot of us are not aware of the beautiful complexity of gender variations. Further, this makes it hard for people to accept and to feel accepted if we do not conform to the norms of society.

*People need to  
feel represented  
to feel accepted*



*Comprehending  
the complexity  
and providing  
options*

The binary gender model has served a purpose in understanding the complexity of humans. However, we see now how restrictive these categorizations are in reality, both in trying to understand ourselves in society and in perceiving others. There is a need for more options for people to choose from when exploring and finding ourselves.



Designers should aim to have a positive impact on all people who encounter our work. We have to design for acceptance of gender diversity, such that everyone is seen and feel a sense of affiliation to society.



## *Pitfalls*

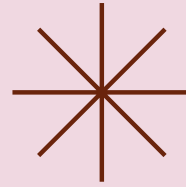
Designers are a part of society, thus prone to rely on the values and norms of the heteronormative and binary gender system. When this is not accounted for, we continue perpetuating restrictive norms leading to stigma, exclusion, and discrimination of many.

When working with complex and wicked challenges such as the gender challenge, it can be valuable to be aware of common pitfalls. Usually, when designers account for gender challenges, it tends to concern the binary. Hence, accounting for genders beyond the binary can be hard to comprehend. Moreover, we often focus on doing “right”, and less on not doing “wrong”. The pitfalls are thus presented to make designers aware of what to avoid in the design processes.



### *Generalizing and stereotyping*

In the process of gathering insights, analyzing and narrowing down to something comprehensible, designers are prone to generalize and, in the worst case, stereotyping people. Consider who is inside and outside of the categories you define for your project, and why. Is the solution at risk of discriminating against people who are already marginalized in society? How can we combat this?



### *Not asking why*

Designers are experts in pinpointing challenges, examining people's behaviour and finding needs. However, asking why these are the challenges; why this is the behaviour; why these are the needs, are sometimes ignored or overlooked. Lack of awareness about the influence of the binary gender system on people can be the reason why norms and values are reproduced in design.

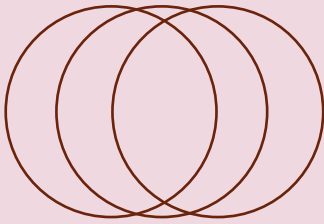
### *The "special" case*

When those of us who do not conform to the gender norms are considered, they are often regarded as a special "topic" or "edge case" that only comes up when it is specifically relevant to the storyline. If every case of gender nonconformity is presented as special, heteronormativity continues to be regarded as the norm.

### *Disclaiming the responsibility*

When we design for the majority, we design for the heteronormative gender norms. When designers claim to follow social trends, we disclaim our responsibility as influencers. The responsibility of bending the norms is therefore transferred onto individuals.





### *Ignoring the problem*

Excluding the concept of gender from the design project removes the importance of being aware of social issues rooted in the heteronormative and binary gender system. If we ignore gender challenges, we are prone to overlook and disregard important needs, thus reproducing the same values which lead to the oppression of many.

### *The binary default*

Defaulting to the binary masculine men and feminine women is not a rare case and is easily justified with how our culture defines gender. However, doing so not only reduces the diversity of gender as a concept but also reduces the diversity within the binary genders.

### *Not seeing does not mean it does not exist*

Though the binary genders represent the majority today, it does not mean variations can not exist. Relying on the heteronormative values and norms excludes those of us who are restricted by these, thus not being able to fully and genuinely express ourselves to the world.

## *Techniques*

When working with intricate challenges, such as gender, it can be convenient to get a pointer on how to approach it. Get inspired by these twelve techniques to become aware of gender biases when working with gender in design.

The techniques aims to convert knowledge from “People”, “Pitfalls”, and “Principles” to practice. Moreover, it should be used to trigger initerest and inspiration.



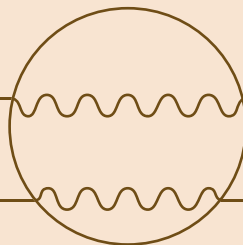
## Discover

### *Uncover your biases*

Do a quick design based on the design project you are doing. By doing a quick design exercise, we are forced to act on our intuition. Reflecting upon the outcomes in retrospect can reveal our unconscious biases towards the topic and people inside and outside the categories we define for our project. Becoming aware of these biases help us become more in control of our decisions while reducing the risk of the impact on the actual project, thus society.

Write down your insights on your own biases. Throughout the real project, remind yourself of this. Pay extra attention to those biases which might be exclusionary or discriminating, especially against oppressed and marginalized groups. At the end of the real project, look back to the reflections you did. What has changed? Why did you learn? What can you bring to the next project?

*Tip: To retrieve more value from this technique, the results can be tested by or discussed with others, preferably a variety of people.*



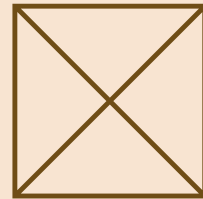


## Discover

### *Test your boundaries*

Empathizing with those of us who are restricted by gender norms on an individual and personal level, is important in understanding the challenges and problems these norms oppose. When do you feel restricted by the gender norms of society?

Use clothes, makeup or the like in your surroundings to create an expression you would be ashamed to wear in public. What is the most embarrassing outfit or makeup you could imagine wearing? Play with style, makeup, femininity/masculinity, norms and so on. Try to uncover why you would feel ashamed. What can you as a designer do to make this experience less stigmatizing and negative?



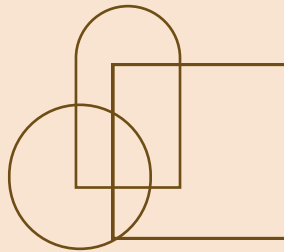
### *Triangulate*

Since the binary gender norms are hardwired in society, affecting behaviour and attitudes, it is important not only to include a diversity of people in our process but also analyzing the data with societal systems. Triangulating between various methods is especially important when paying attention to the influence of social systems and norms on the behaviour and attitude of participants. Collect quantitative and qualitative data. Compare what has been observed with what has been said. Compare the insights from this with a holistic view of social systems.

## Discover

### *Prime yourself with diversity*

Get inspired by diversity. Create a moodboard or collage which represents gender diversity and expression. Look into different gender-inclusive organizations, norm challenging movements and expressions. Do an image search on artefacts, sculptures, colours, and words you get inspired by. What does the collage express in the end?



### *Go on a context safari*

The city centre is rich in content on how society depicts gender. After retaining a bit of knowledge on the gender challenge, take a stroll through the city centre with a critical eye. How is gender depicted? By becoming familiar with the status quo and the current discourse on gender in the environment you are designing for, it is possible to know what to avoid and what to change.

## Discover



### *Collect data without being present*

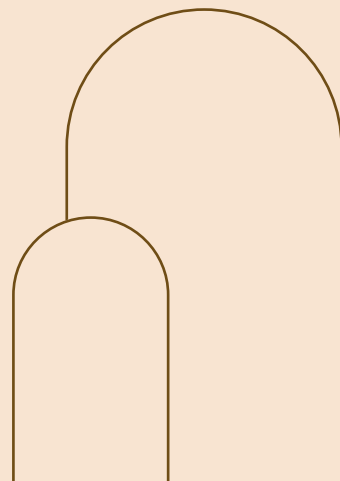
The huge influence of gender norms on society and people, might be hard for people to answer honestly. Additionally, because the norms are hardwired in society, many are not reflected upon the topic. Their behaviour and attitude in general and towards the topic might be very much influenced by binary expectations. This makes it important for designers to understand the collected data in a bigger context. How might the answers be influenced by norms, expectations, stigma?

Because of this, it can be valuable to collect the data anonymously and over some time to enable the participants to reflect upon the topic. Diary studies are an example of data collection without being present, whilst propelling reflection over time.

### *Research generations*

Do a desktop research on the targeted generation of your brand. What were the gender norms when they grew up? How can your brand and solution help create acceptance of and affiliation for those of us who do not conform to gender norms? When doing this, it is important to keep in mind that people from the same generation might not hold the same values and attitudes. However, it can provide an understanding of the circumstances they grew up in.

Also, do a short research on the future target generation for the brand. Examining trends of various generations can provide insights into what might be needed and accepted in the future.

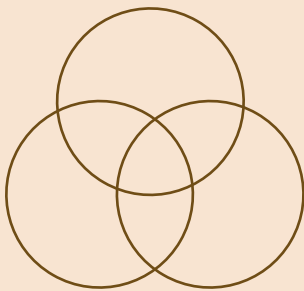


## Define

### *Think about the approach to the challenge*

How can your design increase acceptance of gender diversity, while creating affiliation? The approach to the challenge can influence the final solution and how you communicate your message. Choose an approach to the gender challenge you find valuable for your project.

- \* Activism vs advocacy
- \* Highlighting the problem vs natural/invisible integration
- \* Promoting the goal (optimistic) vs confronting status quo (pessimistic)
- \* Provocative vs inclusive



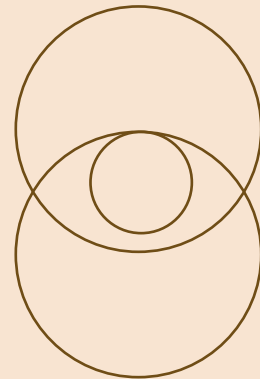
### *Find the common ground*

Challenge your perception of gender. Create two seemingly opposite personas and try to find their common features in your project. Similar people can experience things differently and different people can experience things similarly. Finding the common ground of people inside and outside the categories you define for your project can help in understanding the diversity in people, how to meet the needs of people with different perspectives, whilst reducing the risk of harming people who are outside of the target group.

## Discover

### *Normalize non-heteronormative personas*

Stereotyping is a common pitfall when working with personas - especially when it comes to gender. Create a non-heteronormative or gender non-conforming persona which challenges the status quo on gender norms and expectations in society. Use this persona in your project to reduce the risk of stigmatizing or discriminating against those of us who do not conform to gender norms. How do you want this persona to experience your solution? How can your project help normalize gender diversity?



### *Create a utopian or dystopian future*

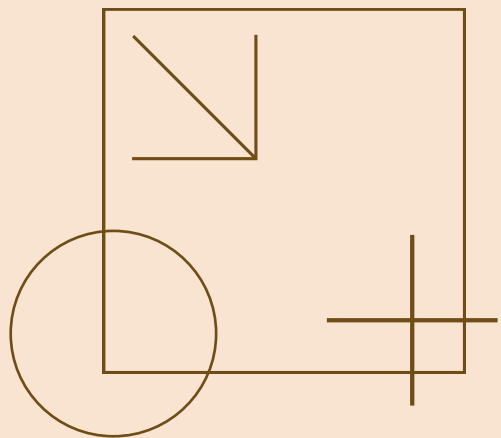
Creating a utopian or dystopian future can help us design for what is desired and understand what we have to avoid. How would a gender-free society be? How would a society filled with gendered taboos and stigmas be? Reflect upon how such societies would influence the attitude and behaviour of people. What is needed to achieve the utopian scenario? Or prevent the dystopian scenario?

## Develop

### *Analyse artefacts*

Look into some of the following factors of the products of your brand and reflect upon how it relates to the gender norms.

- \* How does the context influence the object in relation to gendered aspects of it?
- \* What are the associated norms of gendered interactions with the product?
- \* What is the function of the product? Is it gender-dependent?
- \* How does aesthetics relate to gender norms?
- \* How does surroundings outside (priming) influence the perception of the product?
- \* What are the relations between masculine, neutral and feminine attributes?
- \* What does the size of the product signalize?
- \* How does the space influence the perception of the product?
  - Rhythm, colour, lightning, atmosphere, music, focal points, layout (zones, departments), beauty, forms and shapes, semiotics, categories



## *Principles*

Including and empathizing with a diversity of people in the design process is an important element for good design. Understanding people, their behaviour and attitude, also includes understanding how they are influenced by social systems, norms, and values. However, this is often missed by designers because we too are influenced by the same systems.

Gender norms are hardwired in society and often overlooked due to a lack of awareness of our biases. Because designers have the privilege of influencing society with our design decisions, we are also responsible for accounting for the impact it has on social structures and systems.

The gender norms in society today are not only restrictive, but they also exclude the wonderful variety in and of gender. When norms and systems in society result in discrimination and exclusion, designers must be open to challenge these. Here are nine principles for working with and rethinking gender in design.

*The principles are generalized to support a variety of design processes. Some of the principles might fit better or less than others in different design projects. It is up to each and everyone working towards a gender-inclusive future to choose which applies to their project and not.*

## 01

## Know your own gender bias

Prejudice is human - that's how we survive in this complex world. However, when prejudices become exclusionary and discriminating, we need to take a step back and look into the actual consequences of it. The first step in becoming a more open-minded designer is in becoming aware of our own gender bias and how we are affected by the binary gender model in society.

## 02

## Know your privilege

Designers are privileged. We are in the front seat, if not steering the wheel, of influencing people and society. Because of this, we need to be aware of the impact we can make with our decisions. We must make sure we combat our biases, and design for necessary and desired changes, with a positive impact. We need to make the best of our privilege to design for an inclusive future.

## 03

## Diversity promote inspiration: expose yourself to it

We are inspired and influenced by our surroundings. Because of the lack of representation of gender diversity in society, it is important for designers to actively expose ourselves to it. Acknowledgement of gender diversity encourages norm challenging and progressive ideas, which can accelerate the progress towards a more gender-inclusive society.

## 04

## Think of who is inside and outside of the categories

Because of the binary gender system, we are prone to unconsciously put people in boxes of heteronormativity. This can lead to solutions that are punishing us when we break gender norms. Identifying people who are inside and outside of the categories we design for can enable aspects of the design that are important to combat biases, discrimination, and systematic oppression.





## 05

**Ask  
why**

In the activity of involving people in the design process, we need to understand how their behaviour, attitudes, and experiences are influenced by the binary gender system. Though many might express to identify with the current gender norms, they are still restricting us in what is socially acceptable and not. Asking "why" can reveal the social structures which are worth criticising.

## 06

**Create acceptance.  
Strive for affiliation.**

Society depicts gender as binary, making it difficult for people to imagine other options of expression, identity, and behaviour. When a gender-biased design is introduced to society, we continue to perpetuate the restrictive values and expectations of people, based on their gender. We have to start exposing people to gender diversity, not only for those of us who do not identify with the binary but also to create acceptance of it.

## 07

**Make it  
relatable**

People need to see themselves in what is represented in society. Though a lot of famous icons have challenged the heteronormative, we also need the masculine mannequin in a dress, a diversity in sizes of crop-tops, sparkle on the male models, muscles on the female models, trans models, non-binary models, agender models, diversity. We need to normalize the relatable to avoid negative attention to those of us who just want to express ourselves.

## 08

**Pay attention to  
semiotics**

Our language, behaviour, attitude, and surroundings communicate the binary worldview. Paying attention to how a design is communicated through language, product language, representation, and context is important in creating affiliation and acceptance for gender diversity. People need to be provided with opportunities, rather than restrictions.



## 09

## Challenge your client and society

Designers often have to consider the demands of a client. We want what is known because what is known is efficient. But what is commonly known about gender in society is also exclusive, discriminating, and damaging. We have a responsibility as designers. Even asking your client "what about the non-binary people?" or presenting a transgendered persona can be enough to start the progress towards a more gender-inclusive society.

