

Negotiating gender beyond the binary: Intersectional perspectives on queer individuals with migration backgrounds

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Abstract

This article examines the possibilities and limitations of moving beyond the gender binary by analyzing the experiences of individuals situated at the intersection of multiple systems of domination, including gender, sexuality, race, and migration background. It draws on ongoing qualitative sociological research conducted in Switzerland using repeated in-depth interviews involving queer individuals with migration backgrounds. The article analyzes three modalities through which gender is produced and negotiated: embodiment, state gender categorization, and language. Building on Risman's (2018) multi-level gender framework and Yuval-Davis's (2015) concept of situated intersectionality, it introduces the concept of an injunction to coherence as a counterpart to the injunction to binarity. The injunction to coherence refers to the expectation that gender inner experience, embodiment, state-defined gender category, and linguistic self-description should align. Together, these injunctions shape who is recognized as intelligible and legitimate in their gender. The findings show that these injunctions shape participants' gender navigation in uneven ways, depending on their social position. The article offers original insights into three main issues that restrict the conditions under which individuals can express and be recognized in their gender. First, intersecting forms of discrimination shape gender navigation through safety concerns, leading participants to adopt strategic (non-)binary embodiments or delay updating their gender markers on identity documents. Second, the ability to navigate pressures toward binarity and coherence depends on access to financial and material resources. Third, cultural representations of bodies and gender influence decisions about adopting - or not - (non-) binary embodiments, sometimes as acts of resistance to normative or racialized expectations. Overall, the article demonstrates that moving beyond the binary is not simply a matter of personal preference but is deeply constrained by interlocking systems of domination. Analyzing gender production and negotiation through the injunction to coherence makes it possible to capture this constellation of gender norms and expectations.

Keywords: Gender binary, intersectionality, queer, race, migration background.

1. Introduction

I first Swiss-ified my origins, then queered my Swissness, and now I am bringing my country of origin back into all of this.

This quote comes from Roumi, who identifies outside the gender binary. They have Eastern European origins and grew up in a low-income family in Switzerland. Their words illustrate their journey to find a place in society while navigating minoritization based on gender, sexuality, race, class, and migration background. Their story raises the central question of this article: what do the experiences of individuals positioned at the intersection of multiple systems of domination reveal about the binary organization of gender?

Contemporary gender regimes are organized around a dominant gender binary that privileges “woman” and “man” as the primary, and often the only, socially recognized categories. These regimes are also shaped by cisnormativity: the assumption that everyone is, and should be, cisgender, meaning that they identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Feminist, queer, and trans scholarship has profoundly challenged the idea of gender as a fixed, coherent, and stable category, showing instead that gender is an ongoing social process negotiated through embodiment, interaction, and institutions. Yet, as Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2021) point out, while we know much about the difficulties faced by trans and non-binary individuals, less is known about how they actively navigate multiple systems of domination in everyday life.

Drawing on ongoing qualitative sociological research conducted in Switzerland among queer individuals with migration backgrounds, this article unpacks the binary gender system by analyzing three modalities through which gender is produced: embodiment, state gender categorization, and language. In each of these modalities, gender is visible, expressed, categorized, and socially (in)validated. The concept of embodiment refers to a way of understanding the body as socially and culturally constructed, rather than as a purely biological entity (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). State gender categorization refers to the inscription of a person’s gender in administrative documents, such as identity cards, where it is typically recorded as F (female) or M (male). Language, through pronouns, grammatical gender, and self-descriptions, enables individuals to define themselves.

Gender is not only produced but is also negotiated through these three modalities. With practices involving their bodies, individuals shape their gender expression, namely the overall impression of gender they convey to others through their body, clothing, accessories, gestures, and other embodied cues. They also negotiate the conditions under which gender categories on identity documents can or cannot be changed. In addition, they negotiate the linguistic terms through which they name themselves or are named by others. To analyze the gender negotiations undertaken by the queer individuals at the center of this study, I draw on Risman’s (2018) multi-level approach to gender as simultaneously individual, interactional, and institutional, shaped by cultural beliefs as well as by material constraints. I also build on Yuval-Davis’s (2015) concept of situated intersectionality, which highlights how identity processes are embedded in shifting social and historical systems of domination.

I argue that understanding the injunction to binarity, and moving beyond it, requires analyzing it together with a second normative injunction, which I term the injunction to coherence. This injunction requires an overarching alignment between one's gender inner experience¹, gendered embodiment, state-defined gender category, and linguistic self-description. It therefore encompasses a broader set of gendered norms and constraints than the gender binary system alone. These two injunctions - to binarity and to coherence - do not operate as abstract ideals but as structuring norms that regulate who is recognized as intelligible and legitimate in their gender.

Drawing on the analysis of these two injunctions, I show that they are experienced unevenly across social positions. Decisions about how to express gender through embodiment, state-defined gender category, or language are never simply matters of personal preference. They are shaped by interlocking constraints: safety concerns arising from multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination, financial and material resources (or the lack thereof), and cultural representations of the body and gender. Because gender normativity is intertwined with racialization and sexual normativity, people minoritized through their gender, sexuality, race, or migration background face even more limited possibilities for navigating gender. For the queer individuals with migration backgrounds at the center of this study, negotiating these two injunctions requires continuous adaptation. By examining these dynamics, this article reveals how binary gender norms are enacted through intersecting systems of domination and how the imperative to appear coherent across contexts reinforces these systems.

The first two sections of this paper develop the theoretical framework, examining how gender is produced through embodiment, state gender categorization, and language, and situating these processes within an intersectional perspective. The following section outlines the methodological approach. The empirical analysis then unfolds across three sections, each dedicated to one of the modalities through which gender is produced and negotiated.

2. Gender binarity across embodiment, state gender categorization, and language

The binary gender system relies on the assumption that there are only two legitimate genders, "women" and "men". It presupposes that sex² is naturally divided into two

¹ In this article, I use the phrase gender inner experience to describe how individuals feel and internally make sense of their gender, which underlies their lived experience of it. I also use the phrase trans and non-binary to refer collectively to people whose gender inner experience does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth. This formulation acknowledges that a person may identify as trans but not non-binary, non-binary but not trans, or both trans and non-binary.

² Sex is understood here as the categorization of human beings based on biological characteristics, including anatomy (penis and vagina), gonads (testicles and ovaries), hormones (testosterone and estrogen), DNA (XX and XY chromosomes), and secondary sexual characteristics (body hair, breasts, etc.). As Fausto-Sterling

mutually exclusive categories. However, this is already a social interpretation of the diversity of human bodies (Fausto-Sterling, 1993; 2000). Such an approach is rooted in a long-standing feminist critique of the naturalization of sex differences, which has historically challenged the assumption that biological categories are self-evident rather than socially constructed. This critique can be traced, for example, in the work of Colette Guillaumin (1992), who emphasizes the social production of sexed categories, and Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), who demonstrates the contingency of binary sex models.

From birth, any existence outside the binary is often erased or rendered invisible. This occurs, for example, through surgical interventions on intersex children aimed at reassigning them to a distinct category (male or female) by modifying their bodies (Gardey & Löwy, 2000), or through the marginalization of those who visibly deviate from the gender binary later in life (Felix & Hennekam, 2025; Miller & Grollman, 2015; Risman, 2009). Cisnormativity is closely entwined with this binary system by considering the correspondence between the gender assigned at birth and one's gender inner experience as "normal and natural" (Robinson, 2022, p. 426), thereby turning a historically situated belief into an apparently universal truth.

Understanding the situation of trans and non-binary experiences within this cisnormative framework requires a brief historical note. Mid-twentieth-century medical and psychiatric models conceptualized trans identity through what Bettcher (2014) terms the "wrong body" narrative, which was a model that sought to restore congruence, through the body, between a person's gender inner experience and the way they are socially categorized in terms of gender. Later sociological, feminist, and trans scholarship, particularly Butler (1990; 2004), Stryker (2008), and Stone (1992), critically challenged this paradigm. Stone (1992), for example, writing against the then-dominant emphasis on surgical transition, urged scholars to move beyond reading surgical procedures as the defining feature of trans lives.

This shift opened the way for trans studies to develop as a field attentive not only to individual experience, but also to the institutional and cultural structures that make some gendered lives intelligible, while rendering others unthinkable. Today, debates about gender binarity, cisnormativity, and trans identity are deeply intertwined: cisnormativity supports binarity, and binarity in turn supports cisnormativity. This interpretive framework materially shapes the everyday lives of trans and non-binary people. As Hilário and Marques (2020, p. 1047-1048) show, individuals "often feel forced to construct an intelligible gender version of themselves in order to gain social validation and credibility". This article demonstrates how this "intelligible gender version" is co-produced through three interrelated modalities of gender production: embodiment, state gender categorization, and language.

(2000) shows, this categorization based on what is visible at birth (anatomy) reduces the complexity of biological reality.

2.1. Expressing gender through embodiment

Gendered embodiments relate to the ways individuals express gender through their appearance (such as body characteristics, clothing, gestures, or accessories), as well as the ways bodies are interpreted and classified into two supposedly natural and hierarchical categories (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Guillaumin, 1992; Laqueur, 1990). The notion of embodiment describes the body as a dynamic entity shaped by the continuous interaction of biological and socio-cultural dimensions (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). The biological dimension refers to physical characteristics such as anatomy, gonads, hormones, etc. The sociocultural dimension, meanwhile, refers to the fact that bodies are social productions constituted through power relations and normative structures (Salamon, 2010) that classify and differentiate them according to what is recognized as a “legitimate body” (Boni-Le Goff, 2016, p. 184). These classificatory systems establish hierarchies of corporeal legitimacy, defining which bodies are considered valid or invalid (Baril, 2015), beautiful or unattractive (Widdows, 2018; Wolf, 1991), white or racialized (Guillaumin, 1992), or masculine or feminine (Laqueur, 1990). Depending on these classificatory logics, certain bodies are granted greater social privilege than others. This approach is informed by earlier materialist and post-structuralist traditions that conceptualize the body as both a site of social inscription and a locus of power relations (Foucault, 1977; Butler, 1990).

Embodiment is central to trans and non-binary experiences. As demonstrated above, medical and social institutions have historically required bodily coherence with gender inner experience as a precondition for gender recognition, reinforcing what Johnson (2016) terms transnormativity: standards through which only trans individuals who conform to dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity receive legitimacy. Indeed, as Allen and Mendez (2018) argue, trans people whose bodies and presentations conform to these ideals tend to receive greater social acceptance (although still facing significant discrimination), while individuals who diverge from normative embodiment, such as non-binary people, experience intensified marginalization. Consequently, despite the diversity of trans and non-binary trajectories, embodiment remains a key modality where binary gender norms and cisnormativity are reproduced.

2.2. Materializing gender through gender markers

State gender categorization constitutes another modality through which the gender binary is produced and institutionalized. It refers to the gender category under which individuals are officially registered, a designation that appears on passports, residence permits, identity cards, and other state-issued documents. As Meadow (2010) argues, these categories operate as institutional constructs rather than natural classifications. Classifying individuals as “women” or “men” relies on social judgments about which characteristics count as qualifying for each category. Although Meadow’s analysis focuses on the United States, it illustrates that social processes (that have become institutionalized) underpin this categorization. This categorization also works to stabilize a normative heterosexual order by tying gender classification to expectations about reproduction, kinship, and the heterosexual family. The question of heterosexuality is

therefore also central: if individuals can no longer be clearly sorted into two distinct categories (men or women), then it also becomes impossible to maintain a clear distinction between heterosexual and same-sex couples. State gender categorization, therefore, emerges as a relational, socially embedded construction sustained through rigid institutional rules.

This modality of state gender categorization becomes particularly visible in systems of legal gender recognition (LGR), defined as “the process(es) by which individuals request the changing of their first name and gender marker in their administrative records so that official registers and their documents, including identity documents, birth or civil status certificates” reflect their self-defined gender (European Commission, 2020, p. vii). Since 2022, Switzerland has adopted a simplified, self-determined procedure for LGR. Residents aged 16 or older can change their gender markers on identity documents (male or female) and, if desired, their first and last names by submitting a declaration to the civil registry, without requiring medical exams, psychological assessments, or surgical interventions. However, Swiss identity documents provide no non-binary option. This combination of procedural accessibility and categorical restrictions illustrates how the state continues to codify and stabilize binary gender. Even as it moves toward more inclusive practices, these are still shaped by transnormativity. Moreover, within institutional contexts, individuals’ self-declared gender carries little, if any, weight compared with the information recorded on identity documents. By contrast, in more informal or interactional settings, an individual’s self-description itself is a social act. This leads to the third modality discussed in this article: language.

2.3. Enacting gender through language

Language constitutes a third modality through which gender is produced. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse defines what can be said and recognized as legitimate, shaping which identities are recognizable (Foucault, 1972). Language, through pronouns, grammatical gender, and self-descriptions, does more than communicate identity: it locates people within symbolic and relational structures. As Dietert and Dentice (2013) argue, discourses constitute individuals as subjects within a framework of meaning. Extending this perspective, a narrative approach to identity emphasizes that identity emerges through an ongoing discursive process in which individuals engage in self-description. They also construct a sense of self through the narratives they produce about their lives and biographical trajectories, situated within specific social structures (Gruszczyńska-Thompson, 2025). Thus, language also creates possibilities for resistance. Through narratives, labels, and self-description, individuals can partially undo gender (Deutsch, 2007) or reconfigure it by adopting or inventing new terms (Mai, 2023). Yet linguistic categories such as trans, queer, non-binary, or even man and woman are saturated with social and cultural significance. Following Butler (1990; 2004), these categories are not merely descriptive but performative: they constitute and regulate what counts as a recognizable gendered subject. Thus, as Garrison (2018) demonstrates, narratives that align more closely with binary or transnormative expectations are often perceived as more authentic and credible. Consequently, the very possibility of social

recognition depends on the extent to which one's discourse conforms to intelligible gender categories.

Taken together, embodiment, state gender categorization, and language form a network through which gender is produced, claimed, determined, and policed. Each reinforces the others: embodiment substantiates state gender categorization, which, in turn, is supposed to naturally describe the body. State gender categorization is made possible through shared linguistic terms ("women", "men") which carry normative representations of these categories, and the gender norms attached to them. Moreover, following Butler (1990), language and embodiment work together to produce the appearance of a stable gender: social norms and regulatory discourses about gender shape how bodies are read, while bodies reiterate these norms through stylized performances. This interdependence between the three modalities of gender production creates a loop of intelligibility. In other words, a system in which gender appears coherent only when alignment is achieved across all three modalities. Understanding these relational dynamics is therefore essential for grasping how the injunctions to binarity and coherence persist, even as individuals strive to redefine themselves beyond them.

3. Understanding gender through an intersectional lens

This article focuses on the experiences of trans and non-binary individuals with migration backgrounds. Because they face multiple forms of domination related to gender, race, and, in some cases, sexuality, their narratives reveal how gender is regulated through intersecting social hierarchies. These experiences are examined alongside those of racialized cisgender people with minoritized sexual orientations who similarly encounter discrimination, marginalization, and the daily negotiation of normative expectations (Calderaro, 2023; Ravier, 2025; Trawalé, 2017). An intersectional perspective thus proves essential to apprehend gender not as an independent variable, but as a relational field embedded with sexuality and race. Building on Yuval-Davis's (2015) notion of situated intersectionality, this article approaches the interweaving systems of domination not as additive or parallel, but as mutually constitutive processes that shape both social positions and lived experiences. From this perspective, intersectionality is not merely an analytical tool to account for multiple life experiences (of discrimination), but a framework for understanding how gender, racial, and sexual hierarchies are co-produced within specific historical and institutional contexts. Yuval-Davis (2015) proposes distinguishing three interrelated yet irreducible dimensions of social life: individuals' structural locations within systems of power, their experiential and identificatory perspectives on belonging, and their normative value systems. Such an approach allows us to analyze how identifications are negotiated through embodiment, state practices, and discourses. In this article, I focus specifically on how the interlocking effects of gender-, sexuality-, and race-based discrimination shape gender identification and expression. While gender identity is often conceived as a matter of individual self-determination, a sociological

perspective reveals the social processes and power dynamics through which self-identification takes form.

Seen through this intersectional lens, gender must be analyzed together with sexuality because the gender binary is structurally tied to compulsory heterosexuality, which Rich (1980) identifies as a form of social regulation. Following Garlick (2003), Abbatecola et al. (2012) also highlight that (hegemonic) masculinity cannot be fully understood without confronting its implicit heterosexual framework. Consequently, gender and sexuality cannot be treated as parallel or independent categories. Rather, they are deeply intertwined, shaping one another through everyday interactions, bodily experiences, and normative expectations. From a theoretical standpoint, the classification of relationships as heterosexual or not depends on how the partners involved are gendered (Chauvin & Lerch, 2013), which shows that sexual categories are themselves produced through gendered classifications rather than existing independently of them. Moreover, feminist and queer studies have demonstrated that this interdependence is not merely conceptual: the gendered materiality of the body shapes sexuality, just as sexuality informs gendered subjectivity. Bodily transformations may lead to shifts in desire or sexual practice (Schilt & Windsor, 2014), while sexual experiences may motivate bodily changes (Doorduyn & van Berlo, 2014). From an interactional perspective, Pollitt et al. (2021) also show that gender expression significantly influences how individuals are perceived and categorized in terms of sexual attraction and practice. Individuals whose expressions deviate from dominant gender norms are more likely to be perceived as non-heterosexual. These norms typically require “proper” masculinity to involve physical toughness, emotional restraint, or heterosexual interest in women, and femininity to involve softness, caring attitudes, or heterosexual interest in men. These norms are structured by the cultural authority of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which organizes gendered behavior around an idealized, heterosexual male standard and casts femininity as its complementary opposite.

Because hegemonic masculinity is itself racialized, i.e., sustained through hierarchies that privilege white, middle-class, heterosexual men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), the meanings attached to gender and sexuality vary across racialized and marginalized groups. In this sense, gender and sexuality, but also race, are co-constitutive dimensions of lived experience, underscoring the need to analyze them in relation to one another (Maria & Tuselli, 2022). Thus, understanding gender and sexuality requires situating these experiences within broader systems of racialization and inequality (Bacchetta et al., 2015; Valentine, 2007). This analytical perspective builds on Black feminist thought, which has long emphasized the interdependence of systems of oppression and the impossibility of isolating gender from race and class. Building on Crenshaw’s (1989) foundational work on intersectionality, queer of color studies have further traced how race, gender, and sexuality are historically co-constructed. This occurred through the regulation of Black bodies and gender variance under slavery and state institutions (Snorton, 2017), or through the erasure of trans people of color from medical archives, exposing the epistemic violence of dominant knowledge systems (Gill-Peterson, 2018).

While these studies focus on the North American context, their insights resonate within European societies, where racialization and gender regulation are similarly interwoven.

As Bacchetta et al. (2015, p. 769) argue, racialized, colonial, and sexualized constructions in Europe produce assumptions that obscure diversity: “Europeans are generally presumed to be homogeneously white, while racialized subjects are generally presumed to be uniformly straight and cis”. For racialized trans and non-binary individuals, these assumptions structure the conditions under which their gender identities are recognized or marginalized. Thus, racial hierarchies operate alongside cisnormative and heteronormative standards to confer privilege on some bodies — cisgender male, white, middle-class, and heterosexual — and constrain others. In Switzerland, scholars describe an externalization of racism (Dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022), whereby structural racism persists yet remains difficult to name or contest. Operating through what Goldberg (2009) calls a regime of “racelessness”, racial difference is rendered invisible and continually displaced onto other times and spaces (Michel, 2022). Within such a regime, gender non-conformity intersects with postcolonial hierarchies, making the daily life of racialized trans and non-binary individuals more challenging.

An intersectional framework also informs the methodological design of this study. The following section details the empirical material and analytic approach, focusing on the narratives of queer individuals with migration backgrounds.

4. Methodology

The data analyzed in this article come from a qualitative study conducted as part of a doctoral research project. The study examines processes of identity construction among queer individuals with migration backgrounds who face multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination in Switzerland. This is part of a broader research project called InMIND (Intersectionality, Minoritization, and Discrimination), which aims to analyze how LGBTIQ+ migrants experience minoritization and discrimination in the Swiss context.

To explore how participants³ experienced discrimination, how their self-identifications shaped those experiences, and, conversely, how such experiences informed their self-understanding, I conducted 43 in-depth, repeated interviews with 23 participants between 2023 and 2025. All participants were born to migrant parents and raised in Switzerland. They originate from Eastern and Western Europe, North, East, and sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Southeast and East Asia, and South America. Among them, 12 identified outside the cisnormative system, that is, as trans and/or non-binary, as questioning their gender, and/or possessing biological characteristics that do not correspond to the medical male-female binary. 11 participants identified as cisgender and non-heterosexual. While all had at least one parent who migrated to Switzerland, 16 identified as racialized and seven described themselves as white.

³ As part of the epistemology adopted for this project, I refer to people who took part to the study as “participants” rather than “respondents” or “interviewees”.

The interviews were semi-structured and used a narrative approach (Butina, 2015). Each participant was interviewed twice⁴, allowing me to revisit emerging themes and gain a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. Additionally, 13 participants followed up through WhatsApp after the interviews, sharing further reflections or experiences connected to our conversations. These exchanges extended the dialogue, either when participants encountered new situations they wished to discuss or when I developed new analytical insights based on their narratives that I wanted to explore with them.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed in its entirety. Data analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), with intersectionality serving both as an analytical framework and as a methodological orientation. Each interview was first read to situate it within a biographical framework and to identify recurring themes. All interviews were then read a second time and coded thematically using NVivo.

The article adopts a case-centered and narrative approach (Riessman, 2008). Each section begins with a detailed analysis of one participant's trajectory, offering an in-depth exploration of their gendered experiences. Subsequent accounts are then mobilized to nuance, support, or contrast the analysis, thereby identifying the broader social structures and power dynamics that shape trans and non-binary lives.

Adopting a co-constructive approach to knowledge production, I shared selected analyses (mostly those presented in this article) with participants who volunteered. These exchanges served to assess whether my interpretations resonated with their lived experiences. This collaborative process of meaning-making was particularly significant given my own positionality as a white, middle-class, cis-heterosexual Swiss researcher. My position inevitably influenced both the research process and the relationships built with participants, as I have detailed elsewhere with colleagues from the InMIND project (Mellini et al., 2026). While I do not share their experiences of racialization or gender non-conformity, our conversations were guided by a mutual commitment to interrogating normative structures that organize social life.

Discussing my data and interpretations with participants also constituted a reflexive exercise, allowing me to critically acknowledge how my standpoint informed the research. It also created space for knowledge to emerge between us rather than from me, assisted by them. This stance aligns with feminist calls for situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), emphasizing that all knowledge is partial, relational, and co-produced through interaction. Our exchanges sometimes led to revisions when participants suggested adjustments to better reflect their experiences. In other cases, participants confirmed the analysis or raised questions about terminology, prompting further reflection. Occasionally, participants agreed to review the analyses but did not follow up, illustrating how the temporal rhythms of research often diverge from those of everyday life.

⁴ Except for 3 who were no longer available to continue the interviews (due to health reasons (two of them) and migration to another country, one of them).

5. Navigating gender embodiment: Issues of security and recognition

The body functions as an interface between one's gender inner experience and one's gender categorization by others. Gendered embodiment encompasses physical traits, such as genitals, hair, or chest size, as well as gender expression cues manifested through clothing, posture, gestures, or voice. The body is therefore a site of ongoing negotiation: individuals work with and on their bodies, while others interpret them through normative frames that classify and assign gender. At the core of this negotiation lies a normative expectation of coherence between one's gender inner experience and embodiment. By centering embodiment in my analysis, I examine how individuals appropriate their bodies as resources to navigate the social demands of gender binarity and normative coherence, particularly in contexts where these demands carry risks of misrecognition and discrimination.

5.1. Gendered embodiment for negotiating security and credibility

The negotiation between gender inner experience and gender expression through embodiment is closely intertwined with the experiences of discrimination an individual has faced. Mona's experience exemplifies this dynamic. Mona's father is of European origins and her mother is North African. She⁵ identifies both as agender and as a woman with a transition experience⁶. She therefore faced the choice between expressing her gender identity beyond the binary (to better reflect her gender inner experience) or aligning her gender expression with one of the socially recognized categories of "man" or "woman". She explains that she eventually chose the latter: to present herself as a woman, aligning her gender expression with dominant representations of femininity in Switzerland. This decision was primarily motivated by a need for safety following repeated experiences of verbal and physical discrimination when her gender expression was what she describes as "androgynous". In "an ideal world", she explains, she would have liked to leave her house "with body hair, a beard, a dress, and makeup" without fear of being attacked. However, her everyday exposure to discrimination and constant safety concerns led her to adopt a more controlled approach to gender expression, modeled on socially acceptable femininity. Notably, she underwent a series of aesthetic procedures, including hair growth, laser hair removal, breast augmentation, and Adam's apple reduction surgery. While she is now perceived as a woman, she considers the security that comes with this recognition as a privilege:

⁵ As will become clear in this analysis, gender inner experience is complex. The pronouns used are those chosen by the individuals themselves, even when they may appear, at times, not to align with their presentation.

⁶ To protect the anonymity of participants, their presentation only includes personal information that is necessary for understanding the analysis.

All that time I spent not being as conforming as I am now was time I spent being safe. [...] So that pushed me, over the last four years, to really do a lot of things to look like a cis woman. [...] I had surgery to reduce my Adam's apple, for example. Before, my Adam's apple was visible, and so, for example, when I expressed a certain femininity, some people might have considered me a girl, but then they would say, 'Oh no, he's a guy, look, he has an Adam's apple'. [...] Now I am always perceived as a woman. I now have the privilege of not having to worry about whether I wear makeup or how I dress, because no matter how I leave the house, I am always seen as a woman.

Mona's experience illustrates the pervasive social pressure to conform to the gender binary. This binary system is tied to cishnormativity, as previously explained. Mona's account highlights this entanglement when she notes that her sense of safety does not stem merely from being perceived as a woman, but, as she emphasizes, from being perceived as a cis woman. This dynamic, which could be described as a form of strategic binarization, illustrates how gender expression can operate as a protective strategy in hostile environments.

Mona's vigilance, however, extends beyond gender. Mona is generally perceived as white, even though her family background on her mother's side is not white. Furthermore, she belongs to a religious minority in Switzerland that is often racialized. This intersectional multiple minoritized position (through her gender, race, migration background, and religion) heightens the risk of being discriminated against. She conceals aspects of her background, especially her religion, to avoid marginalization. This strategy mirrors her previous concerns regarding her gender:

In my head, I was actually paranoid [about people finding out that she had transitioned]. And it was the same with being a person [of her origin and religion]; I really developed a kind of hypervigilance for my safety, even before my transition.

Mona's awareness of multiple forms of discrimination stems from her experiences of marginalization, reflecting two intertwined systems of domination. The first relates to her position within her tightly knit, highly normative religious community, and is directly linked to her gender identity. During the early stages of her transition, her mother urged discretion, discouraging public appearances together and advising Mona to avoid community gatherings to mitigate gossip and, therefore, marginalization. This reaction also reflects intra-community dynamics specific to migration contexts, where social ties are dense, interknowledge is high, and norms tend to be more closely monitored, making deviations from gender expectations more visible and potentially more costly. The second form of domination relates to Mona's racialization and religious background, which situate her in a minoritized position in Switzerland. While she had long been perceived as white, an identity categorization that concealed both her migration background and minoritized religious affiliation, her transition made her increasingly "racially ambiguous", particularly due to her (now) long, curly hair:

After I began my transition, most people could tell from my features and hair that I wasn't Swiss, or rather, that I wasn't white, but that I was somewhat racially ambiguous.

This shift illustrates how gendered and racialized norms intersect to shape the social legibility of bodies, highlighting the contingency of racial categorization in relation to gendered embodiment. It also shows that processes of racialization are not fixed, but can evolve across the life course depending on bodily transformations, as well as on broader migration-related dynamics. In Mona's case, her previous categorization as white partly obscured her migration background, whereas after her transition, she experienced a reconfiguration of how she is read within Swiss racial hierarchies. These shifting categorizations also affect the conditions under which she is socially positioned and recognized, thereby shaping her possibilities of belonging across different social contexts. As Lavanchy and Purtschert (2022) highlight, racial and migratory categories in Switzerland are historically and discursively entangled. Non-white individuals are typically migrantized (Dahinden, 2025), i.e., racialized as migrants, whereas those perceived as white are assumed to belong to the non-migrant majority.

Mona's narrative demonstrates that the actualization of gender through the body is shaped both by cisnormative expectations and intersectional discrimination based on gender, race, religion, and migration background. Efforts to increase personal safety through gendered bodily practices (such as hormone therapy) can simultaneously heighten the risk of discrimination based on other individual characteristics, underscoring the challenges faced by individuals located at the intersection of multiple systems of domination, such as gender, race, and migratory regimes.

While Mona adopts what is considered a feminine gender expression to mitigate the risk of discrimination, other participants develop more fluid, context-dependent strategies. Roumi, who identifies as third gender, once expressed their identity through what they describe as a "visually extreme" combination of gendered codes in their daily life: colorful clothing, makeup, heels, and a beard. Yet this exposed them to persistent mockery and verbal violence, as their appearance "was always seen as something dissident", especially at work. Over time, this led them to adopt what they call a "situational and strategic" gender expression, adjusting their presentation according to context, namely, a more expressive style, with makeup, in nightlife settings, and a more conventionally masculine one (shirts and trousers) at work:

People see me as a guy. So I'm going to play along with that. I know how it works. I know the codes. I've analyzed masculinity thoroughly. So I can easily do it. But then it is conscious, I'm aware of it.

This gender performance reflects a pragmatic attempt to balance their gender inner experience with the need to avoid discrimination as much as possible in the workplace. As a racialized trainer working on equality issues, Roumi regularly faces the discrediting of their expertise. When the audience is composed of individuals Roumi perceives as "white and straight" (in terms of gender and sexuality), they often question the legitimacy

of Roumi's knowledge, drawing on both racial stereotypes and gender normativity. Such interactions illustrate how social recognition remains unevenly distributed: the credibility of minoritized voices is frequently undermined when they do not conform to dominant expectations of whiteness and masculinity. Initially, Roumi experienced conforming to masculine norms (i.e., aligning with their birth assignment) as a form of "dressing up". Over time, however, they learned to use this strategic passing with a certain degree of comfort, transforming what began as constraint into a situated form of agency.

5.2. Gendered embodiment for well-being and emancipation

While for some participants, including Mona and Roumi, gender expression is primarily anchored in strategies of protection and credibility, for other participants, it is more closely tied to bodily sensations of well-being or to processes of emancipation. Orel's experience illustrates this corporeal feeling of gender embodiment. With sub-Saharan African origins, he identifies as a trans man while emphasizing that his sense of self aligns more precisely with a non-binary identity. His masculine presentation nonetheless operates as a protective strategy in a context where non-binarity remains risky, as illustrated by the cases of Mona and Roumi. Yet for Orel, masculine gender expression serves not only as a shield but also as a source of well-being. He describes experiencing a profound sense of bodily coherence the first time he wore a binder:

At first, I didn't think I was trans. I tried on a binder and cried because I felt like it was the greatest liberation of my entire life.

This embodied comfort informed his decision to further masculinize his gender expression. For Orel, masculinity was not an obvious or default path but rather the one that offered the greatest sense of well-being within the limits of the social and bodily possibilities available to him. His narrative highlights how gender expression emerges from a continuous negotiation between the social injunction to gender binarity, the desire to align with one's gender inner experience, and the need for safety.

Although Orel primarily identifies as non-binary, he adopts a gender expression that is socially read as masculine. By contrast, Sof, who identifies as a non-binary and genderqueer person of East African origin, wants to be socially recognized as non-binary. However, their long curly hair and visible chest lead others to categorize them as an "ultra-feminine" woman, thereby denying their non-binary identification. Sof attributes this perception to specific gendered bodily characteristics (long curly hair, large breasts) commonly associated with femininity and reinforced by racialized stereotypes that depict Black women as "feline" or "curvaceous" (Khan & Vidal-Ortiz, 2025).

During primary socialization, Sof's body and hair were closely policed. Their mother urged them to conceal their chest and straighten their hair, reflecting an (interiorized) desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty norms. This also points to the role of migration trajectories and generational positioning. Depending on when and under what conditions parents migrated to Switzerland, and how they are racialized, conformity to dominant norms may become a key strategy to secure social acceptance. This is particularly relevant

for Sof, who is second-generation, as their embodied practices are shaped both by inherited norms and by their own negotiation of race- and gender-based expectations.

Thus, for Sof, choosing to wear long, natural curls may be interpreted as an act of emancipation by rejecting beauty standards centered on whiteness. This reappropriation of hair, widely documented in scholarship on racialized embodiment (Bédinadé, 2022; Eock Laïfa, 2016; Kwizera, 2022), serves as both an identity marker and a site of political resistance.

Yet within queer spaces, Sof encounters new injunctions. They note that in the queer community they frequent in Switzerland, non-binary gender identification is expected to be expressed visibly and consistently through embodiment. In other words, non-binary identity is expected to be visibly legible through an intentionally “ambiguous” gender expression, particularly via hairstyle:

There is a current trend in non-binary fashion to have a mullet haircut, and this cut does not work very well with textured hair. [...] And I don't want to cut or straighten my hair because it's been a long journey to accept it and because it corresponds to white, European beauty standards.

Therefore, Sof resists what they view as discriminatory injunctions by keeping their hair long and curly. They consider that the short haircut expected in the queer community they frequent is designed by and for white people, who often have straight hair. Their hairstyle is thus guided by the desire to assert a self-determined expression rather than to conform to any imposed aesthetic regime. Norms of recognition within queer spaces are structured by implicit expectations shaped by whiteness and the conditions under which individuals can feel legitimate or experience a sense of belonging within these spaces.

Similar dynamics were also experienced by Roumi: after a training session they had just led, an acquaintance asked them if they were “no longer queer” because their gender expression that day aligned more closely with their birth assignment. These instances reveal mechanisms of intra-community surveillance that determine who is considered “androgynous enough” or “radical enough”, to quote Roumi. The queer community in Switzerland, while seeking to subvert gender categories, can paradoxically reproduce new forms of conformity. Recognition of a non-binary identification thus becomes conditional on one's capacity to make it visually legible through culturally intelligible gendered embodiment. Here, a dual dynamic is at play. On the one hand, as discussed earlier in relation to transnormativity, trans people whose trajectories align more closely with conventional representations of femininity or masculinity tend to face less discrimination from the dominant population: “the threat of identity challenge influences the construction of these accounts, encouraging respondents with ‘messy’ stories to balance efforts to center fluidity against the need to maintain social intelligibility” (Garrison, 2018, p. 615). On the other hand, within queer communities, these “messy stories”, particularly when embodied, are often valorized. Thus, even within queer communities, a normative system of bodily presentation is reproduced, one that draws boundaries

between bodies deemed sufficiently queer to be recognized as such and those that are not, a process Orne (2017) conceptualizes as queernormativity.

These narratives reveal three central dimensions of gendered embodiment. First, the affirmation of gender identification outside the cisnormativity framework cannot be disentangled from social relations of race; the intersection of these power relations constrains possibilities for recognition among individuals holding multiple minoritized positions. Second, the injunction to coherence, which demands alignment between gender inner experience and embodiment, operates within queer spaces also; individuals who identify as non-binary are often expected to manifest that non-binarity on their bodies. Third, the body emerges as a site of strategic navigation, whether as a means of protection, a tool of resistance, or a way for emancipation.

6. Navigating state gender categorization: Issues of security and cost

Following Foucault's (1972) analysis, state gender categorization can be understood as technologies of power that delimit the boundaries of what is considered a legitimate identity. By assigning individuals to two mutually exclusive categories, state bureaucracies reaffirm the division between "male" and "female" as both a naturalized and institutionalized fact. In Switzerland, as in most national contexts, civil status recognizes only two gender markers: "masculine" and "feminine"⁷. Since 2022, individuals legally registered in a Swiss municipality have been able to change their sex marker and/or first name directly in the civil registry. Foreign residents with a Swiss registration may also use this procedure without having to modify any identity documents issued by their country of origin.

As with embodiment, two interrelated normative logics operate here: the injunction to binarity and the injunction to coherence between the state-defined gender category and the gender perceived in social interaction through embodiment and language. Because identity documents function as bureaucratic representations of a person's identification, such coherence becomes a condition for social recognition and institutional trust. When these dimensions diverge, they often give rise to bureaucratic suspicion and heightened exposure to discrimination. These dynamics are further intensified for individuals who are racialized and/or perceived as foreign (Lavanchy, 2015), as the analysis below shows.

6.1. Navigating security through gender markers

As discussed earlier, Orel identifies as non-binary but undertook both social and bodily gender transitions to be recognized as a man in everyday life. However, gaining such recognition also exposes him to the risks of being associated with Black masculinity in a predominantly white society. During his bodily transition, he had to ask himself whether

⁷ Ordinance on civil status (OCS), art. 38, al. b.

he was “ready to be seen as a Black man in society”. This question encapsulates how racialization reconfigures gender transitions, embedding Black trans men in collective imaginaries of suspicion and criminalization (Beaman et al., 2023; Jones, 2017; Russell, 2025).

The intersection of gender and race becomes particularly salient in Orel’s interactions with institutions, especially the police. While his masculine gender expression increases the likelihood of racial profiling, the “F” on his identity documents paradoxically provides protection from potential police violence:

I’ve even thought about questions like: what if one day I was charged by mistake? Because I do get stopped by the police sometimes, and the way a [Black man] is treated is not the same as the way someone who is perceived as a woman is treated. And if, for example I were to be placed in a cell for, say, the night, or whatever, I wouldn’t feel safe if I were placed in a cell with cisgender men.

Administrative femininity thus becomes a kind of institutional cover, a paradoxical shield protecting him from being read as a potentially threatening Black man. However, this strategy is context-dependent. The same discrepancy that safeguards him during police encounters becomes a liability in other settings, such as housing, employment, or travel, where mismatched documents expose him to transphobia:

The appearance on my ID card is from before I started my transition... [...] If I have to fly today, I’ll shave to be safe at the airport [to better match the photo on the ID card], except that once I arrive, it will make me feel unsafe because I’ll have dysphoria and passing issues, because with the way I look, people might deduce that I’m trans.

Orel’s trajectory illustrates how state gender categorization and embodiment are tightly interwoven, positioning individuals within intersectional (risks of) discrimination, based on race and gender. The rigidity of state-defined gender categories thus freezes gender into static forms, preventing the contextual flexibility that is often essential for the safety of trans and non-binary individuals.

Silver’s case further illustrates how such rigidity can hinder the everyday life of a trans person. With South American origins, Silver identifies as a trans woman. She explains that, in most social contexts, she adopts what is commonly perceived as a feminine gender expression but is frequently categorized as a man. She has not changed the gender marker on her identity documents.

For her, this marker becomes particularly significant when using public restrooms. She typically decides which restroom to enter based on how she believes others are perceiving her gender. Yet having “M” on her documents limits her ability to navigate these situational gender categorizations. Even when she enters the women’s restroom because she feels she is being recognized as a woman, she still risks confrontation if someone else perceives her as a man. In such moments, her identity card would likely work against her should the situation escalate.

Although the use of public restrooms might seem an anecdotal aspect of daily life, it actually crystallizes what Westbrook and Schilt (2014, p. 34) describe as “gender panic”: “situations where people react to disruptions to biology-based gender ideology by frantically reasserting the naturalness of a male-female binary”. This dynamic is intensified, as Westbrook and Schilt (2014, p. 46) further explain, when a person who is categorized as a man enters a gender-segregated female space, because “male anatomies are framed as sexual threats toward women”. Thus, state gender categorization, which aims to institutionalize identity, simultaneously constrains how individuals can navigate through gendered spaces. Fixing a single, mutually exclusive gender category limits a person’s ability to adapt their embodied practices to different situations, which can increase the risk of discrimination.

Finally, it is noteworthy that while both Silver and Orel are racialized, Orel identifies as Black, whereas Silver describes herself as mixed-race. The issue of police visibility is therefore more salient in Orel’s experience, particularly given his gender and that he lives in a large metropolis, whereas Silver resides in a village on the urban periphery.

6.2. Economic and symbolic costs of gender marker changes

Changing gender markers on identity documents is also shaped by economic and bureaucratic inequalities. In Switzerland, the procedure varies by canton⁸, with fees ranging from CHF 75 to 100 (as of November 2025, this range is approximately € 80 to 110). For many trans and non-binary people who often already face economic hardship (Baptista et al., 2023; Coffman et al., 2025; Stone et al., 2020), these costs can be significant.

Akia’s experience illustrates these constraints. She identifies as a trans woman with North African origins. She has not yet changed her gender marker on her identity documents, although she wants to do it as soon as possible. But facing economic limitations, she prioritizes expenses that have a more immediate effect on her gender categorization by others, such as clothing and cosmetics that reinforce her feminine gender expression:

I haven’t changed my ID card yet because it’s too expensive. It would be good for me to have an ID card with “she” written on it. I’d be so excited, but on the other hand, I don’t want to spend all my money. I want to buy makeup and feminine things.

Her choice reveals how economic and material resources shape transition trajectories and determine access to recognition: administrative validation may be deferred in favor of the interpersonal legitimacy that underpins security in everyday life. These economic barriers are often combined with administrative fatigue. For individuals already engaged in multiple bureaucratic processes (social assistance or unemployment), the paperwork required to amend gender markers can become untenable, as illustrated by Olivio, who

⁸ In Switzerland, cantons are the country’s federal member states, which are significantly autonomous: each possessing its own constitution, legislature, government, and courts.

identifies as a trans man of sub-Saharan African origin. He receives social assistance, is completing his studies, and has a dependent child:

There's a lot of paperwork, and I find it psychologically very burdensome. [...] I'm a bit fed up with everything at the moment. I'm a bit... I'm tired, actually. I've given so much over the last few years that... I need to take care of myself, too. That's it. [Regarding the rent] I don't know how I'm going to manage.

The case of Olivio further illustrates how the intertwining of minoritized social positions restricts the flexibility individuals have to navigate gender recognition. Financial insecurity, the physical and emotional strain of his transition, and the discrimination he faces because of his gender identity leave him with neither the time nor the energy to prioritize the administrative procedure for changing his gender marker. In his daily life, securing housing, caring for his child, and managing basic stability take precedence over a bureaucratic process that feels overwhelming. These constraints also reflect the role of classed resources in shaping transition trajectories, as an individuals' ability to prioritize administrative recognition over everyday survival needs is unevenly distributed.

6.3. Gender markers as gatekeepers of familial status

Finally, state gender categorizations also shape how individuals imagine and inhabit other gendered social roles. Roumi's narrative exemplifies this dynamic. Roumi was assigned male at birth and registered accordingly in their identity document. They are in relationships with men, which has led them to rule out parenthood as a viable option. This was not merely a personal choice but the structural outcome of intersecting gender, sexual, and state norms that rendered parenthood both symbolically and legally inaccessible. Until 2022, when same-sex partners in Switzerland gained the legal right to marry and jointly adopt children, such family configurations were institutionally excluded from the legally recognized family structures. Reflecting on this, Roumi explained:

For a very long time, for most of my life, it wasn't an issue for me, because legally, it wasn't an option for me either. And since it was always a theoretical question, it always remained in that realm, and I never really moved beyond it. [...] But I think that if I had been cis-heterosexual, I might have considered the question [of having a child] in a more thoughtful way.

State gender categorization, therefore, does more than marking gender on paper. It determines the life trajectories individuals can pursue. By defining which family arrangements are institutionally recognized as legitimate, they delimit the horizons of identification and projection available to individuals (whether trans, non-binary, or cisgender) depending on their assigned and registered gender, as well as their relational configurations.

Like with gender embodiment, the experiences of the queer individuals presented here illustrate the limits of binary logics in state gender categorization. This modality of gender

production operates both as a mechanism of validation and a tool of governance. It creates conditions in which individuals must navigate administrative rules, societal expectations for gender expression, (precarious) financial conditions, and their own gender inner experience. For some participants, deciding whether to change their gender marker depends on personal safety, a concern that is particularly pressing for racialized individuals subject to racial profiling. Beyond safety, the modification of gender markers entails both economic and symbolic costs, adding to the burdens of individuals already navigating multiple forms of discrimination. Finally, gender markers determine what individuals can do socially and legally, depending on their relational arrangements and partners' genders, which includes marriage, parenthood, and other forms of recognition. Altogether, these dynamics underscore the uneven and negotiated nature of state gender categorization, a reality that becomes especially visible when analyzed through an intersectional lens.

7. Gender mediated by language: Three registers at work

The third modality of gender production is that of language, both in the use of labels that convey social representations and in biographical narratives and everyday conversation. Language functions simultaneously as a site of self-understanding and a medium of social recognition. De Lauretis (1987, p. 19), drawing on Silverman (1983), shows, for example, that “subjectivity is produced through language, and that the human subject is a semiotic and therefore also a gendered subject”. Thus, according to her and other post-structuralists, gender is a socially produced category, continually shaped and reshaped through “sociocultural practices, discourses and institutions devoted to the production of women and men” (p. 19). She situates gender within the intersection of power, knowledge, and representation, highlighting how normative discourses regulate intelligibility and legitimize some identities but marginalize others.

Moreover, following Butler's (1997) concept of performativity, discourse is not merely descriptive but constitutive. Speaking about oneself is an act that brings the self into being. Yet, as Butler (p. 134) reminds us, such acts are never free from power: “the conditions of intelligibility are themselves formulated in and by power”. In other words, discourses operate within normative frameworks that validate certain forms of speech while rendering others unintelligible. Spivak (1988) also highlights that, within colonial and patriarchal structures, the “subaltern”, those systematically excluded from systems of power, such as women and/or racialized people, cannot fully speak, as their voices are filtered, reinterpreted, or erased by dominant discourses. Efforts by intellectuals with privileged status to “give voice” to the oppressed often risk reproducing these hierarchies, speaking for rather than with them. Language, then, is never neutral. It is always a modality of gender construction that involves power relations.

Keeping these considerations in mind, this section highlights the importance of the words individuals use to describe themselves and the social imaginaries they convey. While contemporary scholarship documents a multiplicity of gender self-descriptions, such as

trans, queer, and also “FtM (female to male), MtF (male to female), intergender, Ft* (female trans), Mt* (male trans), FtX (female to X), MtU (male to unknown), FtW (female to whatever), [...] fluid, gender variant” (Alessandrin, 2017, p. 207), there is generally little room for more detailed explanations of these. Nevertheless, a more precise exploration of how gender is put into words allows us to perceive subtle distinctions in how it is understood and experienced in everyday life. Indeed, the interviews I conducted suggest that a sense of gender coherence is often achieved through ongoing narrative work. From these narratives, three registers emerge: transcendence, biology, and queerness, each of which I describe in the following sections.

7.1. Using a transcendent register to describe gender

Some participants understand gender through the lens of transcendence, drawing on a spiritual interpretation. In this framework, gender is conceived as an embodied aspect of an immaterial being, with the male/female binary representing a material manifestation of a spiritual essence. Several participants who adopt this perspective describe themselves, to varying degrees, as non-binary or beyond the gender binary. For example, Roumi explains:

I consider myself to be of the third gender [...] and spirituality is really linked to my gender identity, I would say. I feel like an earthly angel, therefore of the third gender, neither man nor woman.

It is also the case with Mona:

I often say that I consider myself to be two things that may be contradictory, but for me, they are not. I identify as both a woman, from my trans experience [...] but at the same time, I also feel like I am agender. [...] Because spiritually, I don't necessarily feel that my soul has a gender.

Spirituality allows Roumi and Mona to transcend the tension between the binary categories available in society and their inner experience of gender. In other words, this framework provides a basis for reconciling the contradiction between these binary categories and their lived sense of gendered self. Considering oneself “neither male nor female”, or as both agender and female, becomes conceivable through the register of transcendence. This transcendental perspective can also serve as a resource for trans people who identify with the gender opposite to the one assigned at birth, adopting what Bettcher (2014) describes as the “wrong body” model, as is the case for Olivio:

INT: So you knew from the beginning that you were a man.

PART: Yeah. ... Yeah! Because that's me!

INT: And so when you say it's because it's "you," you're not referring to your body?

PART: No. It refers to my soul, my spirit. My energy.

This register does not necessarily prescribe a specific gender expression. For instance, Roumi navigates between masculine and feminine expressions depending on the context. Mona and Olivio, by contrast, underwent binary transitions. Olivio also adds:

I've always been very boyish. Even when I was little, my mother forced me to wear skirts, but I didn't want to wear skirts. You know, things like that mean that in my body I was already a man. I have a man's mind, a completely man's mind. [...] I've always been like that. That's who I am.

Olivio employs temporal continuity to naturalize his gender identity, presenting the male gender not as a reconstruction but as a pre-existing (i.e., transcendent) truth. For him, the central issue is the coherence between embodiment and gender inner experience, with discourse affirming the stability and legitimacy of his gender for himself and for others. This logic contrasts with that of Roumi and Mona, for whom actualizing gender in discourse is less about achieving stable correspondence and more about managing the misalignment between gender identity and the body. This illustrates the complexity of gender experience. The way one identifies, whether inside or outside the binary, does not determine how one will embody that gender.

7.2. Using a biological register to describe gender

The second register can be described as “biological”. In this register, individuals draw on medical and bodily logic to make their gendered life experiences intelligible and legitimate. While the transcendental register frames gender as pre-existing the body, the biological register treats gender identity and the body as inseparable dimensions. For some participants, the mismatch between their gender inner experience and their embodiment is experienced as unbearable, as illustrated by Assa, who identifies as a trans woman of Western European origin. She explains that, before beginning her social and physical gender transition, she felt that some practices involving the body, such as sexual practices, seemed physically unnatural and impossible to her.

And the reality is that, from a medical point of view, I am a trans woman. With a male skeleton and male chromosomes. [...] But behaving in the gender assigned at birth... for us [trans people], it's unnatural. [...] And there are things that don't work, in relation to our bodies, at least sexually.

This register remains embedded within a binary framework, in which the “right” body is considered a prerequisite for authenticity (Connell, 2010). More concretely, the way body and gender are inseparable in this register can be seen in two distinct but related ways. First, for some participants, living with a strong mismatch between embodied sex characteristics and gender inner experience produces forms of distress that interfere with everyday practices, especially those involving physical intimacy. Assa's account illustrates this clearly: before her transition, certain sexual acts were not just uncomfortable but felt physically impossible because they contradicted her sense of self.

Second, bodily modification can be understood as a means of restoring coherence between embodiment and gender inner experience. In this logic, surgical and hormonal interventions are not perceived as optional enhancements but as necessary corrections that allow the body to align with an already-existing, gendered self. Lia, who identifies as a trans woman with Eastern European origins, exemplifies this perspective. She interprets gender-affirming surgery as “correcting a mistake of nature” aimed at adjusting features she experiences as incongruent with her womanhood. Her narrative shows how medical practices are mobilized to resolve this perceived error:

Because I was born with a man’s body, I have masculine features, I have a masculine anatomy [...] but deep down, in my head, I am a woman, except that my physical appearance doesn't match my mind. So I want to change my appearance a little bit, not a lot, just to correct it. For me, it’s actually reconstructive medicine.

Lia’s account demonstrates that the biological register relies on normative assumptions about what a woman’s or a man’s body should look like. These norms shape what participants consider a coherent or livable body and influence the kinds of interventions they view as necessary. In this sense, gender representations do not emerge only through abstract representations: they are also shaped through the materiality of the body, and the transformations individuals pursue to make it possible to live according to their gender inner experience.

7.3. Using a queerness-oriented register to describe gender

Finally, the third register can be termed “queerness”. Drawing on vocabulary from queer communities, individuals seek to name their gender experience as precisely as possible, matching identity terms to their experiences and feelings related to gender. For example, Deniz, with Middle Eastern origins, introduced himself during our first interview as a “bisexual and non-binary male... something like that”. Then he detailed:

I find it difficult to always recognize myself as a man, but at the same time, I know that people perceive me that way. [...] But deep down, I recognize myself more as non-binary.

At the time, he was in a relationship with a heterosexual woman who “likes the traditional side” of gender roles, which led him to perform “the male role” within their relationship. A year later, during our second interview, he reported that his gender identification remained “still pretty much the same”, but he now felt less compelled to enact a masculine role, as he was partnered with someone who fully acknowledged his non-binary identity. This shift allowed him greater freedom to transgress conventional gender norms, for example, by wearing dresses or nail polish. A few months after this meeting, he sent me a message reporting that he had discovered a term online that perfectly captured his gender experience:

I found the expression online: Fem men with masc appearance. It refers to individuals assigned male at birth who express themselves with masculine physical characteristics but also possess feminine qualities and tendencies. [...] I didn't even know this term existed, and it made me feel so good to read it.

Deniz's experience illustrates that gender identification is neither fixed nor static, but fluid and continuously evolving. His experience also shows that gender identification is shaped through social interaction, which can strongly influence how a person behaves in relation to their gender. It finally demonstrates that language functions as a key modality for gender production, enabling individuals to articulate nuanced expressions of gender and sexuality that extend beyond the traditional lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, queer, asexual and agender labels.

For some participants, this process of moving beyond traditional labels also facilitates the intelligibility of their gender experience in relation to their sexuality. For instance, Hessam, who identifies as a gay man of Western European origin, considers himself as cisgender but also "a bit of a light queer", thereby encapsulating both his gender identity and his positioning in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005):

I consider myself a man. But I don't see myself as a macho, ultra-masculine man [...] Yes, I have a beard, I look like a man, but I don't mind wearing makeup... um... I like to wear clothes that blur gender lines, so if I had to really think about it, I would perhaps consider myself queer, but a bit of a light queer, also in relation to my sexual orientation.

Similarly, Mona emphasizes the importance of specifying her trans experience to reflect her unique and specific gender experience:

I am a woman with trans experience. For me, my trans experience is also very important in the construction of my identity as a woman.

During our second interview, a year later, she clarified:

I don't have the same experience as a cis woman. And so, for me, it's important that I can say that I am a trans woman because it doesn't take away from my legitimacy as a woman. But on the other hand, I don't want to say that I have the same life experience as a cis woman because that's not the case.

These examples illustrate that gender is actualized within language, where individuals can deploy queer vocabulary to describe themselves in ways that are more nuanced than the traditional lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, queer, asexual and agender labels. In this context, the queer discursive register functions both as a means of articulating one's gender experience and as a tool for social positioning, enabling individuals to situate themselves as members of multiple minoritized groups.

8. Conclusion

This article unpacks the gender binary system and explores the possibilities and limits of moving beyond it. Drawing on qualitative research involving queer individuals with migration backgrounds in Switzerland, it has analyzed three modalities through which gender is produced and negotiated: embodiment, state gender categorization, and language. By examining how gender takes shape across these modalities, this study has highlighted how individuals navigate the overlapping pressures of both the injunction to binarity and what I have termed the injunction to coherence: the expectation that one's gender inner experience aligns with gendered embodiment, state-defined gender category, and linguistic self-description. Gender is perceived as coherent only when these dimensions are aligned.

This coherence, however, is not natural; it is socially constructed and continually negotiated. Because gender norms are co-constituted with sexual normativity and racialization, these negotiations are particularly challenging for queer individuals with migration backgrounds, who face intersecting systems of domination related to gender, sexuality, race, class, and migration regimes. As a result, their possibilities for negotiating gender are strongly limited.

This paper has demonstrated empirically that decisions regarding how gender is produced and negotiated through gendered embodiment, state-defined gender categories, and language are never merely personal choices. It offers original insights into three main issues. First, participants often face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, sexuality, race, religion, and/or migration backgrounds. As a result, safety concerns shape strategic gender navigation. For participants identifying beyond the binary, adopting a binary gender embodiment – presenting themselves in ways that lead others to perceive them as either a man or a woman – can function as a protective strategy against cisnormative discrimination. Similarly, strategic passing – adapting one's gender expression to the social context – may prevent professional or social discredit. For Black trans men, delays in changing gender markers on identity documents stem from the risk of police violence targeting Black men.

Second, navigating the injunctions to binarity and coherence depends on resources. Procedures such as changing the gender markers on identity documents, undergoing gender-affirming surgeries, or engaging in bodily modifications such as hair removal or make-up involve financial, administrative, and symbolic costs, requiring both economic means and mental capacity.

Third, representations of the body and gender shape how the latter is produced and negotiated across these three modalities. They influence, for example, whether someone feels inclined to pursue surgical transitions. This depends on whether the body is understood as something that should reflect the gender inner experience, or as a socially constructed entity that becomes readable as “female” or “male” through normative interpretations. These representations also affect how non-binary individuals position themselves within queer spaces. Some participants intentionally choose not to follow the aesthetic norms associated with non-binary embodiment. For individuals assigned female at birth, these norms may signify making their chest invisible, partially shaving their hair,

or not removing body hair. For individuals assigned male at birth, it may involve adopting a mullet hairstyle or wearing colorful clothing or make-up. Such refusals act as forms of resistance. They challenge restrictive, or racially coded expectations of what non-binary embodiments ought to look like.

These dynamics highlight the analytical value of considering the injunction to coherence. Individuals who identify beyond the binary face not only cisnormativity but also transnormativity, a framework that privileges transgender identities aligned with a medicalized, binary, and heteronormative model of gender. They also encounter queernormativity, the reproduction of hierarchies within queer spaces through subtle policing of who embodies queerness adequately. Analyzing gender production and negotiation through the injunction to coherence makes it possible to capture this entire constellation of norms and expectations. It evidences, empirically, why moving beyond the binary is difficult in everyday life. Going beyond the binary is never simply a matter of personal preferences. People who identify outside the binary face multiple risks of discrimination. At the same time, trans individuals who identify within the binary but whose gender modalities do not align across embodiment, state-defined gender category, and language also experience strong pressures to conform. By foregrounding the experiences of queer individuals with migration backgrounds, this article has shown that moving beyond the binary requires engaging with the full spectrum of gendered domination and its interconnected systems — systems these individuals confront daily and challenge in subtle yet persistent ways.

An important avenue for extending this discussion is to examine how the segregation of spaces shapes gender. These spaces may be explicitly organized by gender — such as locker rooms, sports teams, or queer community venues — or structured by other social divisions, as in asylum centers or migration shelters. Analyzing them through the lens of the injunction to coherence, together with an intersectional perspective, would highlight how spatial arrangements constitute another modality through which gender is continuously produced, negotiated, and policed, making some lives more possible than others.

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