

## Beyond the binary. Challenges and opportunities of a gender revolution

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### 1. What we are talking about

Co-editing a journal in gender studies, as is the case for the person writing these opening lines of a multi-authored editorial, provides a privileged vantage point from which to observe the changes that inevitably shape scholarly debate in terms of sensibilities, themes, theoretical approaches, and language. Against this backdrop, the first point we wish to emphasize is that in the inaugural issue of *AG AboutGender*, published in February 2012, queer was the only term available to us to articulate a critique of the gender binary - that is, the socially produced inability, at least within the limited and arbitrarily defined horizon we call the West, to conceive of gender identities between or beyond the female/male and feminine/masculine dualisms (see Abbatecola et al., 2012). In the following issue, one of us concluded an article with the following words (Risman, 2012, p. 29):

Twentieth Century feminism fought hard, and often successfully, for women's rights. The 21st Century movement we envision goes far beyond that - we imagine a world beyond gender.

The idea of gender beyond the binary was already clear to us as a desirable horizon, yet we still lacked the language to name it. Only a few years later, in 2017, the book *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* was published in the United Kingdom. In its introduction, Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (Richards et al., 2017, p. 1) wrote:

This book has been hard to bring to publication. One of the first problems we came across was that the authors did not know what to write—or rather they did know, but

did not know that they knew, as it were. “But no one’s written on this before,” people would say, and, in general, they were correct. There was no jumping-off point—no “Here is the literature and here is how I am adding to it,” no body of work to form a firm ground from which to leap.

This is, therefore, a relatively recent field of inquiry, emerging alongside the equally recent increase in the visibility of people - especially young people - who identify as non-binary (Risman et al., 2022), supported by an expanding body of media, literary, and embodied representations produced both by and for the community (Borrelli, 2024). We speak here of new visibility, rather than visibility per se, because, as several scholars - including Robinson (2012) and Alex Iantaffi (2017) - have argued, trans, queer, and non-binary identities have always existed. What is new is not their existence but their public legibility, following centuries during which colonial violence and the processes of epistemic and social crystallization it engendered rendered these identities invisible and unspeakable - histories about which we still know far too little.

But what do we mean by gender beyond the binary, and who are non-binary people? While answering the first question is relatively straightforward, gender beyond the binary recognizes that gender identities can exist between and beyond the female/male binary and that such identities constitute a natural expression of human diversity. Defining who non-binary people are, however, is considerably more complex. As Richards et al. (2017, p. 5) explain:

Whatever their birth physicality, there are non-binary people who identify as a single fixed gender position other than male or female. There are those who have a fluid gender. There are those who have no gender. And there are those who disagree with the very idea of gender. [...] It follows from this – and from the fact that most research still only offers binary choices for gender – that the proportion of the general population who are non-binary is very difficult to measure.

Moreover, in some contexts, non-binary is understood as part of the broader transgender umbrella, whereas in others non-binary functions as an umbrella category in its own right. For these reasons - and perhaps precisely because of them - a special issue devoted to gender beyond the binary and non-binary identities is now more necessary than ever. Such an issue also offers a particularly fertile space for scholarly debate, insofar as non-binary understandings of gender pose a compelling challenge to conventional ways of conceptualizing the meanings of - and the relationships between - the categories of sex and gender (Stewart, 2017).

We now turn to the contents of this special issue.

## 2. Our theoretical frame: Gender as a social structure

This special issue of *AG AboutGender* reminds us that the scholarly investigation of gender and the feminist movement for gender equality go far beyond the stratification that so clearly remains between women and men. Gender matters to each of us as individuals, but these articles highlight how gender is far more embedded in social life than merely an aspect of our individual selves. This issue brilliantly illustrates just how deeply gender is embodied not only in our bodies and minds but also in our interactions, and our social organizations and cultural logics. Some of the articles even highlight possible strategies for effective feminist social change.

In this Introduction, we briefly offer a theoretical lens useful for comparing and contrasting the very different articles, to help us understand gender beyond the binary more clearly. The articles in this issue highlight the sociological argument that gender is a social structure of stratification that enables and supports inequality (Lorber, 1994; Connell, 1987; and Risman, 2018a; 2018b). Gender is a social structure that creates inequality between women and men, and stigmatizes those who are gender non-conforming, including nonbinary and transgender people. The gender structure has implications for all three levels of social analysis: the individual level of gendered selves, the interactional level of expectations we hold for one another based on cognitive bias and gender stereotypes, and the macro level of cultural logics and formal rules and policies of organizations, from political to religious to educational ones. Gender structure affects all three levels of analysis because social structures exist outside individual desires or motives. We are born and raised within the gender structure. We may conform or rebel, but the reality of others' expectations, cultural logics, and organizational rules affects us, however we come to understand our own lives. And yet, while we are born into societies that shape us, the reality of social construction reminds us that societies are constantly created and re-constructed. Sociological theory shows that while social structures shape individuals, those very rules and assumptions that exist before we were ever born were constructed by others before us (Giddens, 1984).

There is a recursive relationship between social structure and individuals. Just like other structures, the gender one we encounter was created by people who lived before us. Gender structure constrains our choices, but also shows that our choices as free agents can reshape it over time.

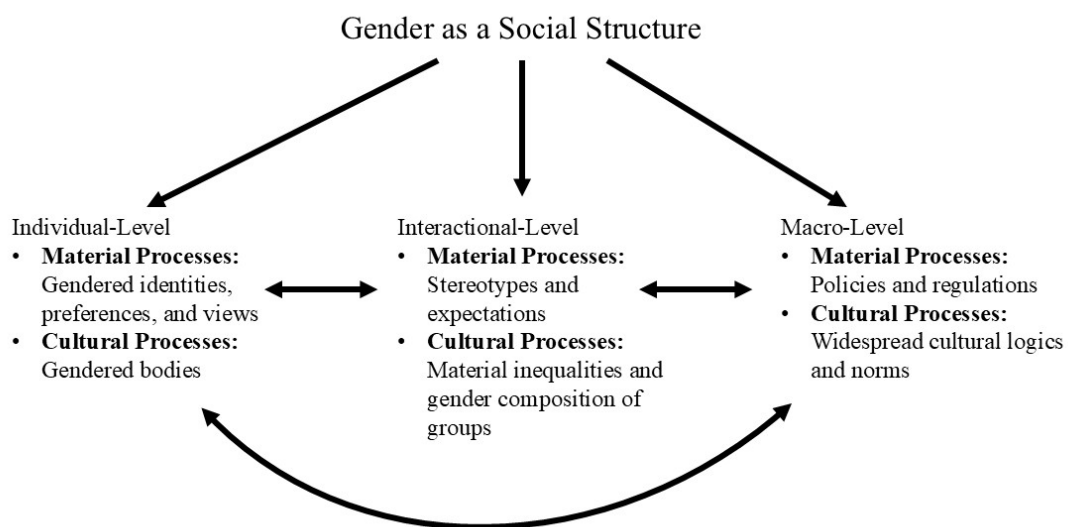
The articles in this issue both illustrate how gender structure shapes individuals and how people interacting reflectively can change the cultural logics and rules of their own organizations, and eventually society. These articles also clearly delineate how deeply gender is embedded in all aspects of social life by highlighting both cultural and material aspects of the gender structure.

The cultural aspects of the gender structure comprise meanings. Within the cultural sphere, individuals internalize gendered beliefs that become part of their own personal ideologies. At the interactional level, cultural stereotypes justify our biases about what is appropriate for women versus men, and perhaps for those who opt out of either category. At the macro level, cultural logics justify our collective way of life, our organizations, our laws, and our policies. But there is more to the gender structure than these cultural

ideologies, norms, and beliefs. These cultural beliefs have real consequences for our lives and so the gender structure also has direct material consequences that we can touch, feel, and measure. Material conditions affect us at each level of analysis: individual, interactional and macro. At the individual level, of course, we are all embodied beings, and how we display and use our bodies is very material. At the interactional level, the composition of the bodies in the room (i.e., proportion of people who are men, women, or nonbinary, white, Black, or Brown) influences how interpersonal interaction proceeds. At a macro level, there are many ways in which access to money, goods, and even health care is distributed unequally across gender categories.

We know little thus far about how nonbinary people fit into this stratification system, although we can predict that, as a marginalized community, they will be disadvantaged. Only when we pay attention to both culture and material conditions can we understand the power and complexity of the gender structure.

Below is a diagram that outlines this theoretical framework and provides details on each level of analysis. We use this framework to introduce each of the articles below.



### 3. About the articles

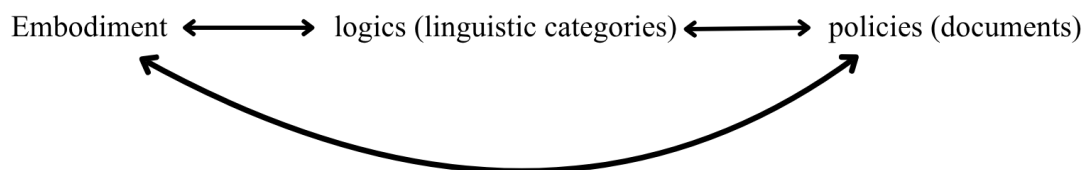
In their article, *Rethinking genders in the digital landscape: Nonbinary identities on Reddit*, Salvatore Monaco, Ciro Prospero, and Carmine Urcioli use both quantitative and qualitative narrative data in their analysis of Reddit conversations. They show how identities are constructed collectively online. Interpersonal recognition and collective validation help those on these online conversations to escape the constraints of the gender binary. Digital interaction mediates individual reflexivity and allows for experimenting with performativity. Monaco, Prospero and Urcioli conclude that not only are nonbinary identities legitimized in online interaction, but the very meaning of such identities is constructed in this online community. Digital interaction helps to produce new knowledge

and new identities as well as to create new communities. This is a very powerful example of how interaction between individuals (digital, in this case) creates new cultural meanings, even new and emerging cultural logics. Cultural dialogue during online interaction creates legitimized identities that loop back and support individual gendered (or nongendered) selves. That is, interaction creates cultural logics that reverberate in a recursive fashion to influence individual's sense of self.

(online) Interaction → macro cultural logics → individual selves

In *Negotiating gender beyond the binary: Intersectional perspectives on queer individuals with migration backgrounds*, Morgane Jomini argues that nonbinary identity must be negotiated across three key domains: embodiment, state categories, and language. Based on qualitative research with queer individuals with migration backgrounds in Switzerland, the analysis shows that expression and recognition are deeply shaped by both material and cultural constraints. Participants argue that there is an “injunction to coherence” across these three domains while access to the ability to achieve such coherence is limited to those from otherwise privileged categories. Jomini incorporates an intersectional perspective by showing how access to the ability to transform one’s body, to change legal sex or gender categories, and to adapt appropriate linguistic identity categories are constrained by economic hardship, racial and ethnic discrimination, and other marginalized statuses. For example, the cost of changing legal status documents is prohibitive for many, and even identifying publicly as nonbinary can create safety concerns. In this research, the concept of “injunction to coherence” illustrates that the gender structure itself pushes us toward conformity across levels of analysis.

Embodiment is the epitome of materiality at the individual level of analysis. State categories are an example of the material aspect of the macro-level state power while the ability to find a comfortable linguistic gender category for oneself shows the importance of transforming macro-cultural meaning systems. This research shows that social change requires transformation at the individual level of embodied selves and the macro level of both cultural meaning and legal documents. One of the primary tenets of gender structure theory is that to make effective social change, you have to attend to each level of the gender structure, both material and cultural elements, which is exactly what the research here illustrates.

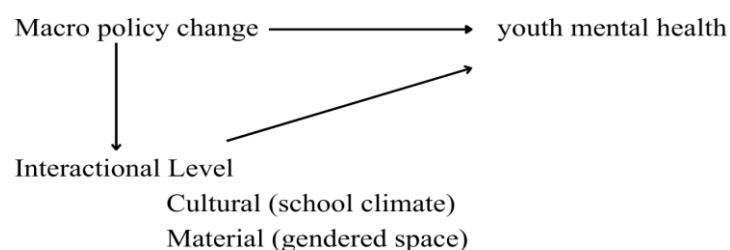


In Richard Bourelly’s *A comparative analysis of nonbinary youths’ school experience and mental health in four European countries*, the author presents quantitative data to show how cisnormative school regimes create serious harm to nonbinary young people. The article however, goes far beyond simple description, by showing the different effects of

national policy, and local context. In France, the country with a longer-standing centralized national policy framework to support gender diversity in schools during the time the data were collected (Spain's policy is more recent), nonbinary students are less likely to conceal their identities at school and less likely to consider dropping out of school or changing schools.

Bourelly shows that top-down policies are very important but not all that matters. The voluntary and fragmented policies found in Germany led to mixed results, as some Länder had stronger provisions than others and implementation often remained non-binding. The discretionary measures created from the ground up in local settings in Italy, together with Spain's decentralized framework and more recent national legislation, appear less consistently effective at supporting nonbinary students but still illustrate the power of interactional context. Schools with more hostile climates and less access to appropriately gendered spaces led to more dissatisfied nonbinary students who were more likely to drop out or change schools. Increased reports of students considering dropping out or changing schools are crucial measures because dropping out is a strong predictor of attempted suicide.

This research shows that the macro-organizational policies (French national policy framework) matter tremendously for the mental health of nonbinary youth. But interactional cultural contexts, such as school climate, and material interactional level experiences, such as access to appropriately gendered spaces, also support nonbinary student's mental health. While it is obviously the case that macro-organizational policies are the most effective means to support nonbinary youth, local schools can also make a difference by changing the cultural and material contexts at the interactional level. The findings support the theoretical argument that we need to address each level of analysis, both cultural and material phenomena. But this research also clearly indicates that addressing some of the gender structure, even without addressing all of it, can improve the quality of life for gender non-conforming youth.



In the article by Nicolà Maria Ingarra and Marta Scocco, *Gender Equality Plans and post-binary perspectives in Academia: Institutional conformations and transformative potentials*, the authors critically analyze the Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in Italian universities. These GEPs exist within the broader European Union policy that has elevated gender equality to a strategic objective and measure of institutional quality. Using an archival documentary analysis, Ingarra and Scocco show how these instruments have both positive and negative consequences. In a patriarchal world, they are designed to address

gender inequalities in university and other research settings. And yet, of course, they were originally conceptualized as entirely within the gender binary and so reinforce that binary.

The GEPs are usually complex documents that attend to interactional experiences, macro-cultural logics, and administrative rules and regulations. While GEPs were conceptualized within the binary, they often create places for reflection and renegotiation of institutional norms. In addition, the GEPs create spaces of inclusion to discuss gender inequality, including the use of inclusive language and often, trans and nonbinary rights. They also matter because gender equality policies in universities are never only about representation or recognition. They are also about the institutional capacity to identify, prevent, and respond to gender-based violence, harassment, and the everyday forms of vulnerability produced by academic hierarchies. When this dimension is treated merely as a formal requirement, or displaced into generic categories such as bullying or misconduct, the structural relation between gender, power, and institutional silence risks disappearing.

These cultural conversations in designated spaces can be the site of epistemological and political production of new knowledge, inclusive of nonbinary and trans issues. Thus, GEPs are both official documents born with binary presumptions and sites of possible post-binary transformations. The ambivalence of GEPs is also produced by the institutional settings in which they circulate. Within contemporary universities, equality policies can easily be absorbed into routines of audit, reporting, and reputational management, losing part of their capacity to disturb established distributions of power. Their transformative potential therefore lies less in their formal existence than in the concrete arrangements that sustain them: resources, accountability, participatory processes, and a language capable of naming violence, exclusion, and asymmetry without dissolving them into more neutral administrative categories. This analysis shows that macro-level changes in organizations, both cultural and material, as heralded by GEPs, creates the space for interactional progressive and creative change. That is, changing the macro level empowers change at the interactional level, which can then later change the organizational policies and so feminist transformations designed to support women's equality can indeed transform themselves into more gender liberatory policies for all.

Macro-level changes → interactional opportunities → Macro-level change

The final two articles, *Anasuromai, or the scandalous superpower of the pudenda. Feminist, transfeminist and queer interpretations of bodily display* by Andrea Ierna and Elisa Venturini, and *The afterlife is a nonbinary relationship: Analysis of non-binariness in Hellraiser (1987) and The Sandman (2022-2025)* by Laura Sofia Torre are cultural analyses. Ierna and Venturini analyze the cultural meaning of a sex/gender related behavior (revealing the genitals), and Torre provides a cultural and media analysis comparing a horror film and a streaming series.

In their article, Ierna and Venturini explore how bodily practices can destabilize the symbolic and political foundations of binary gender systems. Drawing from a genealogical and transfeminist analysis of *anasyrma* - the act of exposing the genitals - and its contemporary reappropriations within the Italian context, they demonstrate how bodies

become terBrains where dominant meanings of sexuality, femininity, respectability, and reproduction are negotiated and contested. Rather than treating the body as a biological reality that precedes social life, the authors understand embodiment as socially and culturally produced, shaped by historical norms but also capable of resisting them. The article demonstrates that bodies are never mere individual possessions, but are always interpreted through broader cultural logics that assign legitimacy, shame, danger, or value to specific bodily practices. Through activist and artistic resignifications of exposure and scandal, practices traditionally associated with abjection are transformed into forms of political agency. In this way, the paper shows that social change can occur not only through legal reforms or institutional interventions, but also through symbolic struggles over the meaning of bodies themselves. Cultural transformation becomes possible when practices previously deemed incomprehensible or threatening are reinterpreted through transfeminist, postporn and activist practices that generate alternative imaginaries of embodiment and belonging. Therefore, this article highlights how macro-level cultural meanings shape embodied selves, but also how embodied resistance can recursively reshape the cultural logics of gender itself.

Agentic intellectual interaction → cultural meanings

In *The afterlife is a nonbinary relationship: Analysis of non-binariness in Hellraiser (1987) and The Sandman (2022-2025)*, Torre investigates how media representations participate in the production and negotiation of nonbinary meanings within contemporary culture. Through a comparative analysis of two influential fictional universes, the article argues that non-binariness is not merely depicted as an identity category, but emerges through alternative configurations of intimacy, desire, relationality, and belonging. The analysis reveals that media texts can function as spaces where dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality are simultaneously reproduced and challenged.

Torre shows that representations of nonbinary subjects are deeply ambivalent. On one hand, they can open up imaginative possibilities that destabilize heteronormative expectations and expand what is considered culturally conceivable. On the other hand, these very same representations can reintegrate gender diversity into recognizable moral and narrative frameworks that ultimately preserve dominant structures. Therefore, mass media does not operate as a passive mirror of social change, but as an active producer of cultural logics that shape how audiences imagine legitimate forms of identity, desire, and social life. This article illustrates how transformation can begin in the cultural sphere. New imaginaries can alter interactional expectations and, over time, contribute to broader social change by expanding the repertoire of identities and relationships available for recognition. Cultural representation thus becomes a crucial arena for feminist intervention: by changing what can be imagined, it reconfigures what becomes socially possible.

Cultural logics (media) → interaction → different cultural logics

Seen through this lens, visibility appears less as a final achievement than as one of the terrains on which the gender structure is reproduced, negotiated, and sometimes unsettled.

The articles collected here show that recognition is always organized through specific cultural and material arrangements: the architecture of platforms, the classificatory force of documents, the routines of schools and universities, the narrative conventions of media texts, and the symbolic regulation of bodies. These arrangements may enable new forms of self-naming, affiliation, and collective intelligibility, but they may also make recognition conditional on conformity to existing institutional, narrative, or market logics. Visibility, therefore, is not external to power. It is one of the ways through which gendered subjects become knowable, governable, vulnerable, and, at times, capable of transforming the very conditions of their recognition.

What can we learn from all these articles together about feminist social change? The research on Reddit conversations shows that social interaction, even online, can create new cultural meanings and help to legitimize these new logics. And newly emerging cultural meanings can then affirm and validate personal identities. Online interaction creates cultural logics that reverberate, in a recursive fashion, to influence individual selves. At the same time, however, the article does not present digital spaces as simply emancipatory but stresses their ambivalence: online environments may also expose users to scrutiny, hostility, surveillance, and new forms of vulnerability. The research on nonbinary migration experiences illustrates that social change requires transformation at every level of the gender structure, from the individual level of embodied selves to the macro level of both cultural meaning and legal documents. Research on nonbinary students' experiences in four European countries illustrates that while we may need transformation at every level of the gender structure, piecemeal transformation is a way to start. Centralized national policies at the macro level matter for reaching most youth, but local schools can also make a difference by changing the cultural and material contexts at the interactional level. Addressing some of the gender structure, even without addressing all of it, can improve the quality of life for gender non-conforming youth. The research on GEPs in Italian universities suggests that change is iterative. Once some changes happen, others can follow. Yet this iterative process is rarely linear. Institutional change often proceeds through partial openings, compromises, and contested translations: feminist and queer knowledge may enter universities through policies, services, committees, training practices, or alliances with actors outside the academy, even when the institution itself remains reluctant to name the power relations that make such interventions necessary. While GEPs may inscribe the binary in some measurement data, their creation of material and cultural interactional space to renegotiate gender norms creates the space for change that benefits gender nonconforming people. Changing the macro culture and policies creates the possibility for interactional reflexivity that can indeed transform organizations to be more gender liberatory places for all. The two articles doing cultural analysis indicate that the intellectual critique of both national traditions and media representations is itself a form of feminist change, influencing macro cultural logics and our understanding of society itself.

In conclusion, the very existence of this special issue of *AG AboutGender* is itself part of the transformation of the gender structure. Each article is an example of how feminists coming together inside the academy are creating cultural change, producing new knowledge. Such intellectual work is how cultural logics emerge, and publication is how they are legitimized. Given the cultural backlash to feminist research and writing in fascist states in Europe and in the United States of America, we must never take for granted the importance, even the necessity, of research and writing on those whose lives push to transform our society toward a more feminist and inclusive future.

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