



News Items (/articles) / Book Review: 'Designing for Se ...



*Annapaola Vacanti is a Ph.D research fellow at Università Iuav di Venezia, Italy. Her research focuses on Human - Technology Interaction, exploring the intersection between human factors, technological development and the latter's social and ecological impact. She is also the organizer and art director of TEDxGenova.*

Achieving gender and sex equity in design is a process that requires awareness, sensitivity, data, and dialogue with practitioners from (many) other disciplines and the people for whom we are designing.

Isabel Prochner, an assistant professor of industrial design at Virginia Tech University, paves the way for achieving such equity through an insightful and pragmatic book. The book provides real-world examples of projects that already aim to address inequality and injustice from the disciplinary framework of gender studies. Such information comes from original interviews conducted by the author, representing a unique research approach for gathering insight into the field of designing for diversity.

Prochner begins the book reminding us that 'all design is biased'. Before diving into the applied design cases, the introductory chapter provides an overview of the concepts of sex and gender – which are still too often confused and misused – and how they relate to other intersecting identity systems such as race, class, ability, age, etc., causing many people to be subjected to unique forms of oppression. Queer and feminist theories are then proposed as the main theoretical frameworks for the research work. From such premises, the following chapters thoroughly describe how diverse design practices can be leveraged to achieve more equitable conditions for different groups.

Several chapters are focused on those who have female bodies and struggle to find products suitable for them. For example, female users are often overlooked when designing personal protective equipment (Chapter 2), because that kind of gear is usually modelled on male measurements, resulting in fitting issues and less effective protection from hazard. The chapter highlights the potentially deadly implications of these design gaps, explaining how anthropometric data and standard regulations need to evolve and adapt. Intersectionality is pivotal in such matters, and a positive case history is presented through the experience of a company providing masks that are specifically designed for different ethnicities and faces.

Another relevant matter regarding female users is discussed in Chapter 5, where the focus is on the role of design in overcoming existing norms surrounding sex and female pleasure. In this context, socio-sexual taboos make it hard for designers to have a striking impact. Nevertheless, relevant case studies such as inclusive dating apps and sexual education apps are spreading in an effort to support female, transgender, and disabled people's pleasure. Chapter 6 delves into the complex relation between design and female bodies by focusing on sportswear. The paradox that women get criticism both for wearing too much and too little is especially evident in sport, and the matter gets even more complicated when it involves women of faith, who struggle to find modest sportswear that can allow them to compete in their preferred disciplines without renouncing their religious beliefs. Prochner describes the design process of modest swim clothes and sport hijabs, highlighting the need for careful user research and thoughtful reflection.

The focus switches on male identifying users in Chapter 4, which brings to light through data evidence on depression and suicide in high-income countries how men's struggles with mental health are often overlooked and untreated. Men show different symptoms than women and are culturally less prone to look for professional support. Although noting that masculinities are plural and socially constructed – the same as femininities – Prochner discusses how a gender-specific design is needed in this case, and how the matter is being approached through e-mental health services and interior design for in-person treatment.

Other chapters move away from gender-specific areas of intervention and describe a multifaceted scenario where the design practice emerges as a valuable support for overcoming gender binarism and allowing everyone to equitably develop their uniqueness. This matter is especially evident in the discussion around the design of toys (Chapter 3), which has a great and long-lasting impact on the development of children identities. Design should offer a wide range of toys, avoid representing extremes like hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity, and offer playthings that encourage children to explore and learn new skills. Another key takeaway from this chapter is the need to give representation to transgender and gender-diverse identities, which can be done easily – for example – in video games.

Another area in which design can be incredibly inequitable, or have a great potential for positive change, is digital technology. In the era of AI, the anthropomorphised technology is as strong as ever, and, intentionally or not, it draws on gender stereotypes (Chapter 7). Prochner gives an insightful overview of the development of virtual assistants, highlighting how strongly biased their responses were in the past, and how big companies had to take responsibility and more accurately design their synthetic reactions. Equitable change is possible and is being led by independent projects (such as a gender-neutral AI voice) and feminist hackerspaces.

Chapter 8 highlights how beauty and personal care products are among the most sexed and gendered products on the market, depicting a complex, intersectional scenario in which sex and gender are deeply intertwined with beauty norms and cultural representation. Design that embeds gender expectations, racism, colonialism, ageism, and ableism is no longer acceptable, as it has a devastating impact on anyone whose body is farthest from the supposed 'ideal'.

The last chapter aims to draw a synthesis of the overall body of work, clarifying that designers should address sex and gender in many ways, as it makes most sense in their specific context. Effective strategies include both deaccentuating and accentuating diversities. Prochner brings more examples and case studies, discussing how unisex and gender-neutral approaches may not be successful in certain situations, particularly because they suffer from a hard-to-root-out masculine bias. Therefore, multi-sex and multi-gender approaches could offer more tools for designers who aim to increase representation, education and social support, and gender-affirmation through their practice.

*Designing for Sex and Gender Equity* serves as a practical guide that brings the extensive insights of feminist and queer studies to application in design. It leverages empirical research and the teachings from Prochner's many interviews to present readers with the necessary tools to act. It can also be an effective entry text for designers to deepen their studies on specific areas such as technology, safety, beauty, etc., from the lenses of equity and inclusivity.


## *Designing for Sex and Gender Equity*

by Isabel Prochner


Routledge

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 85 Great Portland Street  
London UK W1W 7LT

 [admin@designresearchsociety.org](mailto:admin@designresearchsociety.org) (mailto:admin@designresearchsociety.org)

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This month, we hear from Derek Jones, Convenor of the DRS Education SIG (EdSIG).

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