



# INTELLECTUAL GEMS

CROSS-FERTILIZATION OF EXPERIENCES AND EXPOSURES



**Edited by: Dr. Munir Moosa Sadruddin**

**Authors: Jennifer Hancock, Terrilynn Renella, Karen Wagnon, Dr. Deidrea Stevens,  
Laurin Mayeno, Dr. Munir Moosa Sadruddin, Marte Skaara, John Row,  
World Federation Against Drugs, Burcu Eke Schneider**



## **Lessons from Parenting and Unlearning the Gender Binary**

**Laurin Mayeno**  
**Consultant and Coach**

### **Speaking Out as Parent**

Like many parents with LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> children, I started speaking out because I wanted to make the world safer for my child. By about first grade, my child Danny was already being chastised for being different and I wanted this to stop. The first time I spoke out publicly was on a panel about inclusive school climate at Danny's elementary school. I was angry that people were mistreating my child, and this came through. But, in reality, I hadn't always been so supportive. Over time, I realized that many of my deeply held beliefs about gender, about what is normal and what isn't, what is valued and what isn't, were at the root of my inability to fully celebrate my child for who they<sup>2</sup> were. If I had known what I know now, I would have worried less and celebrated my child more.

Danny is now an adult, and I've been working with families of LGBTQ+ children from many different backgrounds and countries for over 16 years. I have seen many parents' love for their children motivate deep change within them, transforming fear and shame into courage and pride. This change often comes at a cost, including loss of relationships with family members, friends, and religious communities. It also comes with healing, because when we free ourselves from rigid ideas about gender and sexual orientation, we find more freedom to be ourselves and to fully embrace our children for who they are.

Our children are changing us, and changing the world. My child challenged me to think differently. Now I'm convinced that unlearning and healing from the harm caused by binary, either/or ways of understanding and participating in gender is crucial for supporting our loved ones. In this chapter, I share my story and some of what I've learned and unlearned, in hopes that my voice makes a difference.

### **The Unquestioned Gender Assignment**

After 44 hours of labor and a cesarean section due to complications, I awoke from the anesthesia and waited anxiously to meet my child. As I was rolled from the recovery room, my family greeted me, "You had a beautiful baby boy!" I had two possible names picked out, depending on my child's gender, and as I held my baby for the first time, I gave them the "boy's" name. I didn't realize it at the time, but my child wasn't a boy. That label was given to them according to the widespread practice of assigning sex (male or female) and assuming gender (boy or girl) based on genitalia. Along with the medical professionals who delivered my child, I accepted the gender assignment they were given without question and without my child's consent.

Years later, I learned that this seemingly innocent practice of assuming a child's gender at birth can be extremely harmful, especially to millions of people for whom the labels don't fit.

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. The + sign is added to recognize that there are limitless sexual orientations and gender identities.

<sup>2</sup> Danny uses they/them pronouns. See more on pronouns, [here](#).

This includes transgender<sup>3</sup> and nonbinary<sup>4</sup> people who must challenge assumptions and expectations about their gender to be themselves. It also includes intersex<sup>5</sup> people, whose bodies are often surgically altered during childhood when consent is not possible.

Estimating the number of transgender and nonbinary people in the world is a challenging task because these terms are not universally used, leading to inconsistencies in how individuals identify themselves. Further, discrimination creates unsafe environments that discourage people from disclosing their identities. Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive data collection systems dedicated to gathering information on transgender and nonbinary populations.

Population experts estimate that roughly two percent of the global population identifies as transgender, gender-fluid, or non-binary<sup>6</sup>. Based on the current worldwide birth rate of approximately 140 million annually, around 2.8 million babies born this year and 28 million over the next decade will identify as transgender, gender-fluid, or non-binary. But the number may be higher as suggested by a recent study conducted by the Pew Foundation. This study found that 5% of US adults under age 30 identify as a different gender than they were assigned at birth (Brown, 2022).

On an international scale, intersex individuals have organized themselves to advocate for their rights, including ending harmful medical practices, such as medically unnecessary genital surgery performed on children.<sup>7</sup> Though variations in genital appearance and reproductive anatomy are natural, surgeries to change these variations are often performed on children under the age of two. These surgeries often cause lifelong physical and emotional harm and, when performed without consent, are considered a violation of human rights.<sup>8</sup>

The practice of assigning sex and assuming gender now starts before birth, with the aid of ultrasound imaging. Gender reveal parties began growing in popularity in the US after 2008.

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<sup>3</sup> “Transgender is a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. “Trans” is often used as shorthand for transgender.” [National Center for Transgender Equity](#)

<sup>4</sup> Nonbinary - “Some societies – like ours# – tend to recognize just two genders, male and female. The idea that there are only two genders is sometimes called a “gender binary,” because binary means “having two parts” (male and female). Therefore, “nonbinary” is one term people use to describe genders that don’t fall into one of these two categories, male or female.” [National Center for Transgender Equity](#)

<sup>5</sup> “Intersex is an umbrella term for differences in sex traits or reproductive anatomy. Intersex people are born with these differences or develop them in childhood. There are many possible differences in genitalia, hormones, internal anatomy, or chromosomes, compared to the usual two ways that human bodies develop.” interACT: [Advocates for Intersex Youth](#) It should be noted that intersex is not a gender identity.

<sup>6</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/trans-population-by-country>

<sup>7</sup> <https://oiiinternational.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/2016/10/intersex-awareness-day-wednesday-26-october>

Jenna Karvunidis<sup>9</sup>, who started the trend, now regrets having done so. She believes that “obsession with gender can be limiting in some ways and exploitative in others.”

The moment babies are sorted into the categories of boys and girls, their socialization into their respective gender roles begins. Families socialize infants intentionally or unconsciously in a variety of ways including choice of toys and clothing, ways of play and interacting, and use of language. [For example](#), parents may be more likely to comfort a child who is presumed to be a girl or describe them as pretty. They may let babies who are presumed to be boys cry longer or refer to them as strong and active.

I wonder if I would have treated Danny differently from the moment of birth had I not assumed that they were a boy. It wasn't long before Danny started to challenge this assumption.

### **Turning Point**

By the time they were 18 months old, I began to wonder about Danny's gender and sexual orientation. Danny loved little ponies, dolls, unicorns, dresses, and princesses, and almost exclusively played with girls at preschool. Because Danny's behavior wasn't what I expected from a boy, I worried that something was wrong with them. I began hearing terms like “gender variance” or “nontraditional boy” to describe children like mine. Instead of accepting my child the way they were, I feared that I was doing something wrong as their parent, and that something needed fixing.

I came across various “causes” of what I thought was a problem. I had suffered a devastating blow during my pregnancy - the loss of my first husband, Danny's dad. I read somewhere that trauma during pregnancy could negatively impact a developing fetus, and began to worry if this had been the case with my child. A friend advised me that the simple solution to Danny's gender-nonconforming behavior was a strong male role model. This idea added to feelings of inadequacy I already felt as a single mom. I began to believe that my child's well-being hinged on my ability to find a new partner who would become the father Danny needed.

A few weeks before Danny's 4th birthday, I asked them what they wanted to be for Halloween. Without a moment's hesitation, they told me they wanted to be a princess. I cringed inside and saw visions of children teasing, other parents passing judgment, and family members reacting badly. Expectations weighed heavily on my heart. I wanted to honor Danny's father by raising a child that would have made him proud and doubted that he would have approved of Danny wearing a princess dress. Reacting in fear, I offered Peter Pan as an alternative. But Danny knew exactly what they wanted, and I relented.

It was moments like these that put my parenting to the test. Would I try to pressure Danny to act more like a stereotypical boy? Or would I support them to be who they were? In these moments my child became my teacher, prompting me to look inward and challenge my ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jun/29/jenna-karvunidis-i-started-gender-reveal-party-trend-regret>

Why did I worry that behaviors considered normal and healthy for a girl might be wrong for my child? Little did I know that this Halloween was a turning point that would eventually lead to a completely different way of thinking.

### **The Gender Binary**

I didn't learn about the gender binary until after Danny graduated high school and I began working with LGBTQ+ activists who introduced me to the concept. Alok Vaid-Menon (2020), the author of **Beyond the Gender Binary**, defines the gender binary as "a cultural belief that there are only two distinct and opposite genders: man and woman." They further state that "this belief is upheld by a system of power that exists to create conflict and division, not to celebrate creativity and diversity" (p.5).

Before learning about the gender binary, I took it for granted that gender was a fact of nature or biology. I now recognize that the gender binary is a cultural belief and that gender is understood differently depending on the cultural or historical context. Cultures on nearly every continent have had more than two genders throughout all of recorded history.<sup>10</sup> Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (2002), the gender scholar and author, describes traditional Yoruba families as non-gendered. Kinship roles are non-gendered and rank is determined based on seniority. There are no single words for girl or boy.

In the gender binary, men and women are considered opposites, but not equal. The gender binary serves to uphold a patriarchal system in which men have power over women. The ideas and practices in patriarchal masculinity emphasize male superiority and authority over women, and the maintenance of gender inequality. Violence against women is used to maintain unequal access to economic, social, and political power (UN Women Training Centre).

The gender binary doesn't exist in isolation, but is a feature of white supremacy and colonialism (Lugones, 2008). It has been imposed historically and currently as part of colonial domination to privilege the European nuclear family structure over indigenous kinship structures and gain control over indigenous peoples. In many cases, this has involved the forced removal of children from families. Despite this, First Nations communities have continued to form kinship structures beyond nuclear families and blood relationships and recognize past and present identities beyond the gender binary (O'Sullivan, 2021).

Although there is no universal definition of masculinity and femininity, colonialism and racism have perpetuated standards based on whiteness and European features. For example, feminine beauty standards place a higher value on light skin, thin bodies, large breasts, straight hair, and large eyes. This reinforces a racial hierarchy that marginalizes and devalues Black women and other women of color (Deliovsky, 2008; Toby et al., 2020).

In the gender binary system, a child's gender assignment comes with a set of rules and expectations, depending on whether they are labeled girl or boy. These rules may be spoken or unspoken and range from how to dress, look, behave, move, speak, and identify, who to

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits\\_map-html/](https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits_map-html/)

love and which bathroom or locker room to use. People who live by the rules are considered normal and granted more privileges. Those who don't fit into the binary and follow its rules are marginalized and punished, often with far-reaching consequences to health and mental health (Bauermeister et al., 2017). Children take part in enforcing gender expectations with their peers from an early age. According to a survey of US elementary school children, nearly 4 in 5 (79%) elementary school children hear remarks from other students about how boys should look or act, and 3 in 4 (75%) hear remarks about how girls should look or act (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2012).

As a mother, I felt the social pressure to raise a child who conformed to gender expectations. I feared that Danny would be ridiculed and I would be judged if I didn't steer them away from behaviors that were considered feminine. I grew up during the era of women's liberation and didn't believe in forcing my child into gender roles, but still accepted the basic premises of the gender binary. During my childhood, I absorbed information from all around me. The books I read and the TV shows and movies I watched, all presented a heterosexual and binary world, where transgender, nonbinary, and queer people didn't exist. I saw rewards and punishments being doled out to people based on how well they played the assumed roles of their assigned genders. I saw girls being praised for being pretty and well-behaved and learned that this would lead to the ultimate reward of marrying a charming prince. Boys were rewarded for being tough and strong and one of the worst put-downs for a boy was to be called a girl.

### **What is Normal?**

The gender binary defines normalcy based on standards that have nothing to do with what is natural, healthy, or good for us. *Heteronormativity* and *cisnormativity* are terms to describe social norms based on the assumptions that heterosexual people and cisgender<sup>11</sup> people are normal. Everyone else is considered deviant or abnormal. Together, they are sometimes referred to as *hetero-cis-normativity*.

The term *cisgender* was coined by Dana Defosse in 1994, who was a graduate student at the time. In Defosse's words, "there did not seem to be a way to describe people who were not transgender without inescapably couching them in normalcy and making transgender identity automatically the 'other'. The term quickly became part of public discourse. Up until I learned about the term cisgender, I had thought of myself as "not transgender" or "normal" by implication. It then became important to acknowledge my cisgender experience and the privileges that come with this identity. Now I notice freedoms I previously took for granted, like being able to go out in public without being in danger of verbal or physical attack, being able to use a bathroom whether or not they are gender-inclusive, or being referred to with the correct pronouns.

According to the rules of *cisnormativity*, people who go along with social expectations related to gender are normal, and those who don't are not. If I hadn't judged my child through the lens of cisnormativity, I wouldn't have worried that something was wrong with them.

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<sup>11</sup> [people who identify exclusively with the gender they were assigned at birth](#)



Heteronormativity and cisnormativity are closely related, with both being rooted in the gender binary. Drawing from different writings, scholar-activist, Kitzenger (2005) states that “heteronormativity” describes socio-legal cultural, organizational, and interpersonal practices that derive from and reinforce a set of taken-for-granted presumptions relating to sex and gender. These include the presumptions that there are only two sexes; that it is “normal” or “natural” for people of different sexes to be attracted to one another; that these attractions may be publicly displayed and celebrated; that social institutions such as marriage and the family are appropriately organized around different-sex pairings; that same-sex couples are (if not “deviant”) a “variation on” or an “alternative to” the heterosexual couple. Heteronormativity refers, in sum, to the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon.” One example of heteronormativity is the double standard regarding who is expected to come out. Unlike LGBTQ+ people, straight people are not generally expected to come out because being heterosexual and cisgender is the default and expected norm.

Merriam-Webster defines normal as “conforming to a type, standard, or regular pattern: characterized by that which is considered usual, typical, or routine”. It further defines *abnormal* as “deviating from the normal or average” or “unusual in an unwelcome or problematic way.”

Sometimes social norms help people keep each other safe and healthy. Other times they can cause harm<sup>12</sup>. Cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and the binary way of looking at gender damage health and wellbeing<sup>13</sup>. While transgender, nonbinary, and intersex people are most marginalized, the impacts are far-reaching and include all of us. Binary gender socialization can harm children in various ways, damaging their sense of safety, self-esteem, social/emotional skill development, and career options<sup>14</sup>. The gender binary erases the existence of people whose identities and expressions don’t fit within either/or categories. It also pressures us all to erase or suppress the parts of ourselves that don’t fit gender expectations. If we fail to do so, we often pay a price.

Ideals of masculinity and femininity are not realistic and often cause stress for people who don’t live up to them. Men, for example, may turn to violence when they feel their masculinity is threatened. Research suggests that masculinity strain is a factor for the majority of perpetrators (Morgan et al., 2022). Transgender people, particularly transgender women, face alarmingly high rates of violence including murder in many countries<sup>15</sup>.

When we allow cisnormativity and heteronormativity to define what is normal, desirable, or problematic, we marginalize anyone who doesn’t conform to social expectations related to gender. If we adhere to rigid standards of masculinity and femininity, we separate people

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<sup>12</sup> <https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/main/prevention-information/35>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.healplusnm.org/how-the-gender-binary-is-bad-for-your-health/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.mayenoconsulting.com/wordpress/how-gender-boxes-harm-all-children-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-tdor-2022/>

from their full selves and each other. Social norms can change and LGBTQ+ people are playing a crucial role in changing these norms.

### **Moving Beyond the Gender Binary**

During Danny's childhood, I was uncomfortable with how Danny expressed themselves. Now, nothing brings me more joy than seeing Danny live their truth loudly and proudly. How did this shift in my outlook come about? Love and concern for my child were huge motivators but were not enough. My belief system related to gender also had to change. For me, this required unearthing and unlearning ideas I didn't even know I had. Being Danny's mom, and working side-by-side with LGBTQ+ activists and other parents helped me unlearn binary, either/or ideas about gender and the expectations that come along with them.

Unlearning systemic gender directives has also given me more freedom to be myself. I'm less worried about living up to standards of femininity that never felt true to who I was. I'm less fearful of others' judgment and more able to speak and live my truth. I have come to believe that freeing ourselves from binary thinking around gender can only make our lives better.

When I started speaking out, it was because I wanted to make the world safer for my child. Now I believe that LGBTQ+ people are making the world better for all of us. If we can move beyond the gender binary as we work for social justice, we can be freer to live more authentic and joyful lives. Imagine a world without pressure to live up to gender rules. Imagine families, schools, and communities where we grow up feeling safe, loved, and affirmed for who we are. This is a world I want to live in.

Here are just a few ways that we can all contribute to creating this world:

- Avoid making assumptions about anyone's gender or placing expectations on them based on gender.
- Celebrate and support the leadership of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex, and LGBTQ+ people.
- Speak up as an ally or co-conspirator in whatever communities you belong to.
- Add your voice to advocacy efforts.
- Learn about the gender binary and notice how it lives within you and the world around you.
- Learn about the connections between the gender binary, racism, colonialism, patriarchy and other oppressive systems.
- Learn about and use gender-inclusive language, including pronouns.
- Read books about gender and LGBTQ+ people to children, especially books that are being challenged or banned.
- Share what you are learning and keep the conversation going in your families, communities, faith communities, schools, or wherever you engage.
- Volunteer for and donate to organizations working for the rights of transgender, nonbinary, intersex, and LGBTQ+ people.

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