



Understanding and healing from gender trauma

Guest: Dr Alex Iantaffi

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[00:00:09] Jaia Bristow

Hello and welcome back to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am so happy to be joined by Dr Alex Iantaffi. Welcome, Alex.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Thank you so much. I am so happy to be here for this Trauma Super Conference. Thanks for having me.

Jaia Bristow

Of course. Thanks for joining us today.

So, Dr Alex Iantaffi is a certified family therapist, gender specialist, sex therapist, somatic experiencing practitioner, clinical supervisor and author of many books including *Gender Trauma: Healing Cultural, Social, and Historical Gendered Trauma*, which is what we're going to be talking a bit about today.

So in your book, *Gender Trauma*, you start from the foundation that a rigid gender binary has not always universally existed, but rather that it's part of settler colonialism. So what exactly do you mean by that?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

I know, right? It seems like a really big statement, but what I mean by that is that I think we take it for granted. Sometimes people say, 'well, this is fact, and this is science that there are two genders, male or female, or there are two sexes, male or female'. And I'm not even going to get too much into the differentiation between sex and gender, and whether it's questionable or not for this because it's not really the topic of the conference. But what I mean by that is that actually that has not always been the case.

So, for example, at the moment, in most Western countries, like the US or Canada or Italy, where I'm originally from, or the UK, we think that gender is really connected to certain biological characteristics. So we have a pretty gender essentialist notion, as it's called, and that's part of biological determinism. And I know those are a lot of big words that may or may not be familiar to listeners. And if they're not, I do break it down a lot more in the book.

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But what I mean by that is that what we are experiencing right now is just a very specific theoretical way of looking at the world. And that's not always been the way that we have all looked at the world. And it is not the way that many people all across the globe still look at the world.

When we look at across time and space, actually what we find is that gender has been much more expensive than two categories, and also that gender has and is not always been predicated on bodies. At the moment we think about gender very much connected to what genital somebody has or what secondary sexual characteristics or what hormones are dominant in our bodies? Are we testosterone dominant? Are we estrogen dominance and so on?

But that is not the way that everybody thinks or has thought about gender. For example, gender sometimes has been much more predicated on social needs and social structures. And so we haven't always thought about gender in two very neat boxes that we seem to have nowadays. And actually those two neat boxes have been really imposed on much of the world through them going settler colonial projects or settler colonialism or neocolonialism, depending on where we happen to be on the globe.

And so this is not always the way we thought about gender. Gender has been expansive in pretty much every corner of the globe we know across time and space, and what we have come to understand, as kind of natural, so to speak, it's the product of very specific view of the world that tends to be this Western European settler colonial view that is very influenced by Christian supremacy as well.

And I feel like I can go into so much more there around even the doctrine of discovery and how the idea of ownership is also really connected to gender. If we even think about our marriage is predicated initially when it starts, on ownership, who owns what? Who owns land? Who is the land passed down to? Matrilineal, patrilineal, all of those ideas are really about social structure and dominance up to a certain point.

And that is not the way that we've always thought about gender. And that is not the way that some people have ever thought about gender, even though we now tend to think this is just the way it is. Babies are born and they're boys or girls. And I'm like, it's actually a lot more complex than that. I don't know if that makes sense. I could say more. I could say less.

I feel like this is a topic I could go on and on, but I don't want to get lost in my own mind and my own argument. So I want to make sure that all those things are making sense.

And I'm happy also to talk about why I think this is so important to dismantle in terms of trauma and historical trauma specifically.

Jaia Bristow

Well, I think we can maybe cycle back to that, but for now I'm interested in, in a very present way, how does everything you've just talked about, how does that impact trauma and all of us living today? How does this historical legacy of trauma impact people today?

[00:05:17] Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. I think that there are numerous ways in which this legacy impacts people today. So one way in which this is really obvious, actually, it's the impact it has on trans people and gender expansive people. We have seen depression and systemic violence that many of our communities experience. And it's not an accident that most of the systemic violence is being experienced by trans feminine Black and people of color and Indigenous trans women, for example, and gender-expansive fem folks. The reason is because there is such a connection between racism, misogyny and patriarchy, and it becomes pretty much impossible to talk about gender in any really meaningful way without talking also about race, without talking about indigeneity as well.

And so in terms of trauma, we see this impact globally of systemic violence against trans women, mostly trans women of color. And we also see the impact also on Black cis women and Black cis men as well, in terms of the systemic racism intermixed with misogyny, sometimes called misogynoir, for example, when it's aimed towards Black women. And we see it in sports, we see how often Black women athletes are questioned around their gender if they excel, for example.

So there are so many examples. And here in what is now called the United States, where I currently live, we see the number of murdered and missing Indigenous girls and women, and again, that is not an accident. There have been many reports and studies that have really shown the connection between the legacy of settler colonialism and the current situation of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and also gender-expansive folks here.

And part of that is really how gender is perceived and then how gender is treated on a social level, whether it's through education, whether it's through media representation. For example, missing and murdered Indigenous women is very under reported here in the US. And when it's reported it's always with the lens of victim blaming. There is this lens of almost drug use that's being put on the victim almost to justify that this has nothing to do with patriarchy or settler colonialism. This is the fault of the people this is happening to. And we see that again and again, the victim blaming.

And we can talk about victim blaming on so many levels but I think in terms of trauma, that is what we see more, sadly. This connection between race and indigenating and gender, and the combination of our bodies are gendered and racialized and viewed through dominant culture and how that impacts people on a day to day basis, which sometimes it's hard to see if we have gender privilege ourselves or also racial privilege or other forms of privilege. And like I said, there are so many examples, even if we just kept it to cis white straight men, which in some way we could say are at the top of the hierarchy, these ideas of gender even impact cis white straight men.

For example, we see in research evidence that they are less likely to seek health care support, for example, when they're facing healthcare issues, which is really this legacy of toxic masculinity, of men as having to be fit and having to be the provider, also not talking about feelings very much, not looking for help. And then we see this legacy in this of not looking for health care support when it's needed and therefore developing healthcare issues.

Having seen the impact of what happens on a marriage when somebody becomes disabled. There are so many examples that we could draw from but for me, they all cascade from this idea that the more we restrict gender from a trauma perspective, the more we contract around gender, and we get more rigid around gender, the more negative impact that has on our bodies, on our psyche, on our emotions, both on a collective level and on an individual level.

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But I think historically we see across the globe gender being much more expansive. And I also don't want to romanticize the past but there is more expansiveness, and settler colonialism brings a rigidity, a contraction and the policing of gender. And not just gender, but gender and race together. If that makes sense.

Jaia Bristow

It does. I think there's probably a lot in what you're saying that's really interesting but maybe for those who are unfamiliar with all these concepts, that might be a bit overwhelming.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely.

Jaia Bristow

Just to simplify a little bit. What I'm hearing, first of all, is that gender trauma impacts everyone. You gave some examples about trans people, especially trans women of color, but also Indigenous women and all of that. But like you say, straight cis, and cis meaning cisgendered, which is the opposite trans, straight cis white men can also experience gender trauma. So this thing that is really universal and impacts us all. And often people think it's relegated to just the fringes of society.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Exactly.

Jaia Bristow

So what's something that you would really like people to take away from this interview? People who listen to this, what's a really important point that you'd like them to understand about gender trauma.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

I think what I would like people to understand is to start questioning some of the things that we've learned through history or through education and even through science, some of those things are not really correct. I think there are lots of people living on social media, saying 'this is science'. 'This is facts'. And actually, then there are biologists going, 'it's a little more complicated than that'. And historians going, 'a little more complicated than that'.

So I think if anything, I want people to take away that gender is a complex biopsychosocial and historical construct, and we cannot think of it in absolute terms. And you're absolutely right. This is complicated. I stewed on those things in my mind for years and years and years. I have a PhD in what used to be called Women's Studies, nowadays would probably be called Gender Studies. I am old. So I've studied gender from a sociological and psychological perspective. I read a lot about gender. I think a lot about those issues as a gender scholar and as a therapist. And it is complex because what we're bringing together is all of these biopsychosocial experiences with history as well. And here we are in the storm, we could say, which at the moment is really impacting sometimes the most vulnerable among us. We're seeing that with trans children, and how they're being targeted by a lot of people.

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And so I think that really thinking about how those concepts of gender are not universal, they're not always the same, and maybe questioning them a little bit more and thinking about, what did I learn about gender growing up from school? What did I learn about gender growing up from my family? What have I internalized in terms of the gender identity, gender roles, gender expectations about who I should be and who other people should be in the world? And is that in alignment with my values or not?

And even in popular media, there is this questioning that the way we look at gender has absolutely changed. There's a popular Netflix TV show, *Lucifer*, I really enjoy that TV show. And there's an episode where there's Adam, the first man according to the Bible, comes back to Earth and in contemporary LA. And he's really having this kind of crisis. When I was created there was an expectation that I would be conquering things and naming animals and being tough and being strong. And now it's really different. And what does that mean for who I am? And now men can be vulnerable. And actually being vulnerable is really scary. And so it goes back to this idea that even when we consider maybe dominant experiences, we could say, so just like the experiences of cisgender white men, there is still kind of a crisis there.

And I think we're seeing that crisis in a number of ways and also in how cis women can be radicalized, for example, where I live here in the United States. And I think there is a direct line between what's happening now and that historical trauma and the positioning that we have experienced in a number of ways, if that makes sense.

Jaia Bristow

That does make a lot of sense. And as you say, things are changing and evolving and shifting, but of course we're all impacted by our history. And I mean our history both on a personal level and intergenerational history, as well as on a broader level, like you're talking about, like colonialism and settler colonialism especially, as you're saying, especially in the US, for example. In Europe as well there's all these different things.

So coming back to a personal level, how do you feel that this gender trauma is passed down generation to generation?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. I said trauma constricts and if we are therapists and healers, we know the trauma brings a lot of rigidity, a lot of constriction and a lot of all or nothing thinking and a lot of polarizing. Whereas when we are not carrying the trauma in our bodies, we can be relaxed and alert and expansive and relational. And so in a lot of ways what we're seeing from generation to generation is the passing on of that rigidity, that passing on of that policing.

If you think about how often, for example, just really simple examples of mothers to daughters can pass on a lot of expectations around whose needs come first, what the role is supposed to be in a household, what you're supposed to be in the world. And sometimes that pressure can even be not just in traditional roles, they can also be in more expansive roles. The pressure of maybe feeling the pressure of having to be more expansive, of going beyond femininity, even if you really value femininity, there can be pressure on either side.

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And intergenerationally often what we see is also the passing out of implicit messages. One of the stories that I share, for example, in gender trauma, which are scholarly facts as well as my experiences as a therapist and occasionally some of my own experiences, because I really truly believe in weaving the knowledge together, is being brought up with the story of one of my aunts through marriage, actually, great-aunts through marriage, being sent to the US, never having met my great-uncle because he had lost his first wife. And there were the children who needed to be parented. And she was getting older, she was probably in her 30s at the time, and so she was shipped off to this other country, didn't speak the language.

And I met this great-aunt later when I was a teenager, and there was a part of me that internalized, if you do not make your own path, your family will make your path for you.

And it can also be really scary. What is the role of somebody who is positioned as a woman in the family, for example? Similarly, we could talk about pressures from father to son and also in both directions, too, mother to son and father to daughter. And none of these expectations are absolute. They're all dependent on our own family context. And those intergenerational patterns can be so woven and complicated because they're also influenced by things like religious or spiritual beliefs. They're influenced by class, they're influenced by race. Again, they're influenced by disability and so on. None of the things are really in isolation, so to speak.

So, for example, we might look at legacies of expectations around the level of education that somebody should attain, or the level of income or prestige that somebody should bring to their family. But also we see it in things like the intergenerational legacy of domestic violence, for example, which is a type of violence that is often very gendered. And usually I would say very gendered. That is also part of the legacy of gender trauma.

And so there are so many things that we might not pay so much attention to or connect together but they are actually connected together. And again, there are so many different things that influence all of those decisions. I remember again in my family, just because those are sometimes the easiest, most accessible examples that we have.

My mom didn't have her own room, whereas her brother did. She didn't get to have her college days but her brother did. It was like the first boy went to college. There wasn't enough money to pay for both of them and so the son was chosen because there was different expectations of what sons and daughters pertain at that specific moment in history, in that specific geographical and class location.

And those stories are going to be different from family to family, depending on all those intersections and times and history, but none of us are exempt. Even those of us who think very critically about gender, who spend a lot of time thinking about it. I often say that these ideas and ideologies, we could say, are like the air that we breathe. They get into our lungs without us noticing.

And, for example, especially my oldest kid has often called me on, 'hey, I think you are doing that thing where you're treating my friendships with boys different than my friendships with girls growing up'. That compulsive thing, I was like, oh, yeah, compulsive cis heteronormativity. And this is a story I share with her consent. But it's so easy to fall into the trap of reproducing those patterns, because we feel them in our bones, often their ancestral patterns. And so it's so easy to fall back into them even when we pay attention, actually.

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And sometimes we can also swing that away because of trauma. So if we've had a pretty oppressive upbringing around gender, we can swing that away of just putting a lot of pressure on the next generation to rebel to expectations more or to be more expansive. And maybe that's not what they want. So it can also, as trauma often does, swing in the other direction and still be rigid and constrictive, if that makes sense. Rather than being in this more fluid, relational, expansive space.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely.

And I think there's a few really key points in everything you've just shared. And number one is that when we're talking about social, cultural, collective identity and trauma, it's really hard to isolate each thing. So if we're talking about just gender or just race or just sexuality or just disability, and all those things intersect in society, first of all. And then within each individual even more so. And then when you add in the individual's family, and then as you said, these things change from family to family, they change from generation to generation, they change depending on the person's gender, the age.

When I compare my experiences to my younger brother's, it's always hard to know sometimes, were we treated differently because of our genders or were we simply treated differently because of our ages? And my parents had learnt a lot more by the time my brother had come along, and also their financial situation was very different when my brother came along.

And so there's all these different factors, and it's really hard to isolate. This is a complex topic and I think it's really important for viewers and listeners to recognize that it's not something that can just be easily fixed overnight. Or even, as you say, you've been studying this for so long and your eldest child still calls you out on so many things.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. None of us are perfect in this. Absolutely.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's one really crucial element. And I think also what you're saying about how we can so often fall from one rigid set of rules or one rigid set of structures, straight into another one. So these days, if we look at, you were talking about your parents' generation and your mum not having her own room, but your uncle was allowed. And you were talking about your great-aunt being sent off and stuff, and, A, that wasn't that long ago, first of all. I think it's important to recognize, but even for people who say, 'oh, well, we've moved past that. We've moved into a new era'. But now there are other expectations.

I know, for example, as a woman, the pressure to do it all and break all the glass ceilings and raise a family and do this, for example. And so I think that there's some really, really important elements in what you're saying. So I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit more about how this gender trauma, really, but like these gender expectations, these gender roles, this gendered life can impact so many people in our day to day lives? What are some other ways that that happens?

[00:24:22] Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. Oh my God. There are so many examples, and even in popular culture. And I love that you said, 'gendered lives' because one of the things I really believe, even for maybe people who identify as gender or outside of the gender binary, gender is part of the structures of our society, literally architectural structures. Our bathrooms and changing rooms are gendered, parts of our educational structure, parts of our legal structure, how we think of marriage, how we think of divorce.

I was brought up in a country, Italy, where murder because of passion was looked at differently. And what that meant really was usually men murdering women being justified under the law. There are just so many different examples of gendered lives, but we often don't think about it through that lens unless we step back and go, hang on a minute, what is going on here in terms of gender?

But on a day to day basis, it's even like, and there's been so much research on this, who does the labor in the home? Who does the labor outside and inside the home of cleaning and cooking and meal planning and making sure that, if you have children, that the children get to the activities that they need to get to? If you have the class privilege to go on vacation, who gets to plan the vacation? And who gets to make sure that everything is ready and everybody's packed? And this is just a small example on a day to day.

And then even on social media. A little while ago, I think this was a few years back where there were all these T-shirts that were going around and these memes around, 'Rules for dating my daughter'. From fathers of daughters.

And a lot of that was about ownership and reinforcing this idea that if you are a girl you don't have your own sexual autonomy to decide an agency. And that somehow you go from one protector, the father, to somebody who's potentially a predator in terms of boyfriend or potential partner. And that there is this lack of agency that girls have. And they looked very benign and we can all laugh at them, but then when you pause and you go through them and you're thinking, what are those things saying?

And I myself as a parent of a girl, her first relationship, I was like, who is this person? And what do I want to know? And then I had to step back and be like, my child has autonomy and agency in her life, and we can talk about things. And if she asks for my opinion, I can give it thoughtfully but this is not up for me to decide. She has got her own agency.

And I think a lot of things that are part of our day to day, of our gender lives we can sometimes laugh off as this is the way things are. 'Boys will be boys' and a little pat on the back. But what are we really saying when we're saying, 'boys will be boys'?

First of all, often what we're saying is that it's okay for boys to be destructive and also distracted, whereas it's not okay for girls to do either of those things. But even for boys, that is not always good. Sometimes that means that some boys are facing quite a bit of horizontal, as well as vertical violence. They're supposed to protect themselves even when they're children, even when they're pre teens or teens because that's parts of masculinity.

So even those things like 'boys will be boys', 'don't be a sissy' for example, all of those things do have an impact on the day to day lives of people and become internalized by our children, who then are deeply shaped and impacted by all of this. And again, we can't separate all of those gendered aspects of our lives from any other aspect of our identity.

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Even just in the last few days on Twitter there's been a lot of discourse, for example, around this new documentary, I think it's *King Richard*, about the Williams sisters, Serena and Venus and their success and why some white feminists have felt, why center a man? And a lot of Black feminists have said this is where there is a difference between white feminism and Black feminism. This is not just individualized, it is not just centered around men and patriarchy and individualization, this is really about the collective. And this is about daughters who wanted to celebrate this family and really uplift how their father made it possible for them to become who they are. And there isn't this separation between individual and family and culture and social context.

A lot of what I say, even in the book, and I do say that and again and again, it's not necessarily new, I just bring a lot of ideas together from a lot of different fields and a lot of different colors. But those are things that many people have talked about for a long time. If we look at the culture of purity balls here in the US or even just more straightforwardly in a lot of Christian culture, there is this idea that the father gives away the daughter when they get married. What does that represent? That represents that the girl child is property to be given away to another man. That's where it comes from historically. And I know people sometimes think like, 'oh, you're really exaggerating, it's just symbolic'. And I was like, 'great, tell me what it is a symbol of'.

When you give away somebody to somebody else, it's like moms don't give away their son to a wife so this is obviously gender dynamics, which goes back to Eve being created out of the rib Adam. The idea of ownership of women by men. It's part of Christian supremacy. And you don't have to like it but if anybody comes up with a better interpretation of what the symbol means, I'm open to it, but usually that is the symbol.

And it goes back to again, not that time long ago where in many places women could not own property and want that man for their lives. And a lot of these things are not that long ago. Some of the stories I was telling about my great-aunt, we are talking about post World War two. That is not that long ago. My mom was born right at the end of World War Two. So this is like the last 70 years. This is not even that long. And if we go back to 100 or 150 years it's even more. The right to vote, which is obviously not... And how that also was not just about gender, but also about race. So many, many layers there to unpack.

I don't know if answered your question, but that's what I was thinking of when you asked that question. I was like, there are examples like every day that I can think of, and some are smaller and some are bigger, but when we step back I think there are so many opportunities to see how many examples we have all around us. We can look at Disney Princesses and how they've evolved over time. We can look almost any aspect of popular culture in some ways.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. Again, there's so much in what you've just said but I think one of the key points that's being highlighted to me is something you said right at the beginning when you started answering, where you said, if we just stop for a minute, take a pause and think about it. And that's the problem. So much of this stuff is so embedded in our everyday lives that we don't even notice it anymore. Things like pockets on women's clothes, for example.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yes.

[00:32:34] Jaia Bristow

Exactly. Not just pockets. And if we look at the history of why that is and the fact that men were meant to carry the money and everything, and women were just meant to look pretty, for example. There's so many things.

And when you were talking about social media, the thing that came to my mind was the targeted adverts on social media. And so my social media must know that I'm a woman because I get adverts for makeup, for period products, for underwear. And then the other day, I was scrolling through my social media, and there was an advert for a drill or some machinery. And I was like, this is so cool. It's at that moment that I noticed just how often the adverts are gendered. Except that then I realized, as I watched the advert, it was for a drill that's actually a cleaning product. So it's not really. It's like you can use this drill to clean your shower. And I was like, oh, I'm being advertised cleaning methods and cleaning products, not machinery. I never get advertised cars. And then when I look at my brother's or my father's or any male friend's or partner's social media, they have totally different adverts.

And again, it's society reinforcing these things and so if we don't stop and think, then we just keep repeating because it's embedded in us. So it's really about taking the time to stop and think, whether it's about the symbolism of marriage, whether it's about what ads are being targeted at us, whether it's about why women's clothes, not only don't have pockets, but are also so much tighter and less comfortable than clothes being sold to men.

And then if we go even beyond the binary of looking at just men and women, looking at why people get so afraid and upset about the fact that some people are trans, some people are nonbinary. And it's like, why is that so scary? What is it questioning in that individual that that's confronting for them to know that some people are trans and/or nonbinary?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. And part of what's scary is the fear of questioning what we know. Partially it's that fear that's very human, humans like certainty, humans like what we can control and there's so much that is uncertain and out of our control. And when we're questioned in our core belief it destabilizes us.

So in terms of trauma, we are stabilized, and often when we are destabilized we lash out with fear, and often the fear becomes fight. And so if the presence of somebody who is gender expansive, like myself, for example, freaks somebody out because then what does that mean? And what does that mean for their safety? What does that mean for the way they've organized their life?

And we're seeing this again and again, we're seeing it in the UK with the gender critical movement. We're seeing it in the US, we've had the worst year yet for an anti trans bills being introduced in a number of legislation across the various States. And so we are seeing that fear in action, and that wanting to restrict and police.

And even the small things like the targeted adverts or the way that things are gendered on the day to day might not look like trauma, but it's not any individual thing, it's the compounding of all of that. The compounding of all of that then contributes to rape culture, the compounding of all of that then contributes to cisgender is transphobic world. The compounding of all of that is also parts of white supremacy. We can look at anything and go, that is small, that is not traumatic, but when we take the full picture and we add it all together, really, we see how all of those different small messages add up to the way that people are treated differently.

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For example, in a court of law there's a lot of research that shows that if, and again, a lot of this very binary just because that's also how we've organized our knowledge. So it's very much based on cisgender folks and men and women. But there's been a lot of research around the criminal industrial complex and how if women have committed a violent act that's considered against nature, against nurturing, they're judged much more harshly than men, for example. If they've done something that's considered outside of a women's nature there's a lot of implicit bias that means they're going to face harsher sentences. And of course, again, then if we compound that with race or class, then that becomes even more clear.

And so when we take any one small thing, it might seem easy to brush it off, but when we then take it all together to look at what is the culture and social environment which they contribute to? Then it becomes a much larger issue.

And the last example I'm going to mention is, I was giving a webinar about increasing access to work for trans and gender expansive employees and of course the topic of bathrooms came up because it always does when it's trans folks, and all we want to do is just pee in peace like everybody else but this always comes up. And there was somebody was very activated about the safety of cis women who might also be survivors. And I have to say, as a survivor, this is a topic that's really close to my heart. I really, truly believe that there's not a lot of safety in this world often for survivors. But policing gender in bathrooms, that's not what we need, because quite clearly, having gendered bathroom has never stopped anybody from assaulting women in bathrooms.

And also, as much as some of the violence against women is perpetuated from outsiders, we know again, from evidence, this is not opinion, these are all facts that come from research, that the biggest threat to most cis women are their cis male intimate partners. You're much more likely to be murdered in many places because of intimate partner violence. That kind of stranger danger. But again, you're brought up with this idea of stranger danger rather than it could be your father, your brother, it could be your husband. They are the people that you actually need to be really cautious about sometimes. But we don't want to talk about that because that shakes up our expectation of the world, which is home should be safe. And the reality is that home is not safe for a lot of people. And some of those reasons are gendered.

So yeah, I don't know if any of that makes sense. Hopefully it gives an idea of how even the small things can contribute to a much more pervasive and dangerous culture and social environment in the long-term.

Jaia Bristow

And I'm so glad you brought that in, because that was actually going to be my next question so you've already answered that for me. But I think again, people can be very dismissive, as you say, of the small things. So what if I get advertised cleaning products and menstruation products rather than tools? Let's be honest, I use more menstruation products than machinery anyway. So whatever. But it's not really about that, as you say. It's a symptom of a much larger issue.

And as you say, again, people who get so caught up in gendered toilets and the idea of safety, it's like, no. Again, that's a symptom of a much larger issue and if we start looking at all these gendered rigid roles and this patriarchal white supremacist culture and all these symptoms, and we zoom out and we look at the fuller picture and start trying to change the systems, and the first step to that is

awareness and acknowledgement, then suddenly that will no longer be as much of an issue. So I really, really appreciate you bringing that in. Thank you.

[00:40:56] Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yeah. No, thank you. And it's like I said, I think that small things are easy to dismiss or laugh off, and I totally get it. Nobody wants to spend their time looking at how pervasive and painful some of those things are, quite frankly. Even when I was writing the book it was such a painful process to really reflect on just how much gendered violence there is in the world in every direction. There's so much gendered and racialized violence, and they really go hand in hand. And it is painful to look at that. But if we turn away from that pain and from that wound, then we are ignoring it and the wound festers.

And I think we have seen the festering on a global level in many ways. And it is not an accident in that we're also seeing the rise of fascist thoughts and feelings in a lot of different places around the globe. None of those things are completely separate and often some of the messaging that's associated with that is really gendered. And again, that's not an accident.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think another really important point is that the problem is not men, for example. The problem is patriarchy. We are all, whether we identify as men, as women, whether we are trans, nonbinary, whether people are male or female or intersex, wherever people fall on the gender sex spectrum, we are all victims of this really messed up gendered culture, which is created so that certain groups have dominance over others. But it doesn't really work. In the end, we all lose.

And I think that that's really important. And I really hope that that's clear to people listening, that it's not pointing the finger at any particular gender or any particular group. It's showing that the system is broken, and we're all victims of that.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Actually, I think the system is working exactly how it's supposed to work. But I totally get it, because I often say that, too, 'the system is broken'. Then I'm like, wait a minute, think about the system. The system is working. It's just working for a very small number of people. Which is how it's supposed to work.

And as well I totally, 100% agree and often the thing that I really want to put across is not about individuality, it's about systems. It's not, no one gender is bad.

I actually think that all genders are beautiful. And I want a world in which gender is so expansive that masculinity and femininity and gender expansiveness and all expressions of masculinity and all expressions of femininity and all expressions of gender freedom and gender expansiveness, all of that can be celebrated and there's no competition. But systemically that's not the world we live in.

And I think the danger also, as well as being victims of that system, we can also be agents of the system without noticing. I remember after the, I think it was the 2016 election in the US, a colleague at a conference was like, 'the results of this election are about internalized misogyny and the fact that women couldn't bring themselves to vote for Hillary Clinton', for example, not to make it political, but to give real world examples. And I had to look at her and just be like, 'yes, and...'

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This is not just about gender, it's also about white supremacy because it's white women who voted in a specific way. So if this was just about misogyny we would not see a divide, not just across gender but also across race. We would see Black women and white women, for example, voting in similar direction if this was about misogyny, but this is not about misogyny. This is about the upholding of white supremacy on which the country I live in right now is founded.

And I think we would be really hard pushed to argue that that's not the case at this point. I hope that anybody with a visible grasp on history can see that whether we like it or not, that is the foundation. And again, because parts of whiteness is individualizing everything, I see sometimes white folks here collapse under shame. White is bad. Nobody's saying that. What people are saying is that whiteness is a category that was constructed to uphold a certain system. And we need to be aware of that, because if we want liberation we need to dismantle the system. And I think if we want gender liberation we've really got to be aware of how the systems work together. And if we want more expansiveness and healing for all of us, it can't just be healing for some of us.

And also, it's not a hierarchy. I have a lot of second wave feminist friends because I'm older, those were my teachers and mentors, and some of them are still struggling and are like, 'well, we still don't even have the equality for cis women, can't you just wait your turn?'. I'm like, this is not how it works. This is not about taking turns because this is not an individualized issue, and there's not a little pyramid of who's more important to get their needs met first. And this is about the collective.

If we think of the collective as a body, if I smacked my finger, which I did yesterday actually, carrying a box, and really hurt my joint, the whole body is going to be impacted by that pain. If I break a leg, the whole body is going to have to adapt and carry the hurt. So if we think about humans as a collective, as long as there's parts of us, so a specific population or specific folks, that are hurting or being oppressed, the body is not well. And so having this idea that somehow it's like first we liberate those folks and then we liberate those other folks, first of all, who gets to make the list? And who gets to decide who got there first? That is very questionable. This is like the argument about who created science fiction that's going around at the moment. It's like who gets to decide who was there first?

And so that is not how we can approach the issue of healing from gender trauma. We need to look at it systemically. We need to look at how pervasive it is, and that can be overwhelming. And that's okay if that's overwhelming for a little bit, as long as we don't just collapse, as long as we find a way to participate into action, if that's what we want, or the very least be able to sit back and observe if nothing else.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. So how do we do that, Alex? How do we heal from gender trauma? What does that look like? How can people, other than the other thing we've already mentioned, which is take a pause and think about it and look at it, what are some other ways that people can start doing the work to heal from this collective gendered trauma?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

I wish I had the easy answer that I can sell, because capitalism also impacts all of this. We talked about property, so I think that we've brought it in a little bit. If I had the answer, that would be great, but as with many things, there's not an answer. I think there are lots of potential answers.

[00:48:46]

I think that having an awareness is definitely the first step. If we're not even aware that our leg is broken, we're just going to keep walking on it, we're in pain and we're like, 'I don't know why I'm in pain. I'm so tired'. We don't know, our leg maybe has a hairline fracture or something. So first of all that awareness is so important and so foundational.

And then I think there is a decision to make about what is the part of work that's for us? I think again, because of the ongoing settler colonialism, white supremacy, often even in activist movements or as healers, we feel we have to do all of it. We have to do all of it and we have to respond to every crisis. And given the inputs on a global level, that is just impossible. There is a climate crisis which is also not separate from the impact of colonialism and the impact of all these other things we've been talking about. There are so many things to attend to.

So partially it's knowing that we are part of a much larger collective and we don't have to do everything, because that would be impossible and we would get burn out. And so sometimes it's like, what is our part?

For me, personally, I know that one part was parenting. What is it that I wanted to make sure did not get passed on to my children?

One of the things I knew I didn't want to pass on, for example, were certain gender expectations, also relationships with food. We haven't really touched on that but that can be also gendered and size and body image and all of that. And so there's a piece I think for parents to think about, what is getting passed on generationally when we parent? But trauma is not just passed on vertically, so from generation to generation, it can also be transmitted from peer to peer.

And so it's also thinking about, what do I want my relationships with others in my life to look like? Are my relationships in integrity, in alignment with my values or not? How are they being impacted by ideas of gender? And they probably are, I would say.

And if you're a teacher, what are the resources that you're using? What is it that we're teaching our children? If you're an architect, how are you designing public space environments? How are you designing structures that you're putting out there in the world? If you are working in the Federal Aviation Administration, only because my oldest is training to be a pilot, let's look at gendered roles, let's look like ableism.

This is pervasive in every aspect of our life. So I don't know if that is an answer but I think a piece of it is to just look at your own life and look at your own world and not just around you, but within you as well. What do I need to heal for myself? And what would I like to contribute to healing in the world?

And for me, I think for a lot of other trans and gender expansive folks, some of the work, not for everybody, but for some of us, some of the work we've chosen to do is around gender because we have so much pain around it. And for me, I'd chosen to do that work even before I was aware of being trans.

When I started my PhD in Women's Studies was actually because of that gender violence and the intergenerational piece around domestic violence. I was really interested in doing that work as I healed within myself then the expansiveness came in and then more of the landscape was revealed.

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And often I think we want to have an answer and a trajectory and I don't know if that's possible. I think we all take stock of what we think is our work in the world. I have a really lovely close friend and healer who often asks, 'why are you here?'. And so I would say to the listeners, I would pose that same question, 'why are you here on this good green Earth at this point in time?'. It is not an easy question to answer. But why are you here? What is your work? And no work is too big or too small or significant or insignificant. We need the collective. It's like we know mosquitoes are significant to their ecosystem, ants are significant the ecosystem, not everybody is a redwood, thankfully, because that wouldn't be a very good ecosystem if everybody was a redwood or a birch.

And so, why are you here? What is your work? And as you learn more and more about how gendered lives might impact your work, maybe that's a good place to start, if that makes sense.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Well, that's a lot of great advice. And what I'm hearing is, question things.

Take a moment to pause and question things. Look at your own life, look at the influences and impacts that you've received and start questioning those and then start questioning the impact you're having on others. Whether that's your peers, your children, your colleagues, your nieces, your adopted nibblings. I'm Auntie Jaia to a lot of children, I don't have any of myself but I have many friends who do. And luckily a lot of my friends are aware of these issues, but some more or less than others and that's something I really want to bring as Auntie Jaia. I want to be the person who can talk to these kids, they're all babies at the moment, but as they grow up about these issues. So I think that's wonderful advice Alex.

How can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Sure, people can go to my website which is finally up to date, thanks to one of my wonderful mentees that has got skills I was able to pay for. So you can go to alexiantaffi.com and all my books are on there. Some of my books are also available in other languages now which is really great. *Gender Trauma* is not yet, but hopefully it will be.

If you are an educator or a health care provider or a therapist, we're all trying to survive under capitalism, this is my book, *Gender Trauma: Healing Cultural, Social, and Historical Gendered Trauma*. It's not very long. It's pretty accessible. Some people liked it, there's some endorsements in the back.

And what I do throughout the book is I really try to tie all of these ideas together in a much more coherent and guided way. So I start from 'how did we get here?' and there is a historical perspective. 'What's happening now?', 'How does trauma shows up collectively?'. Pulling the families that have perpetuated through generation to generation. And then, 'How does it manifest in relationship?'. And then I end with, 'How does it manifest systems and forward healing?'.

And maybe that's a good thing to finish with, is actually reading the last paragraph, if that's okay, of the section on forwards healing, which is collective dreams and visions and possibilities.

And in there I say it's much better to think about on my own two feet is...

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"I believe the healing from gender trauma lives in the spaces between us, the spaces across which we try to reach for one another when we dream of community, when we create structure centered around healing, justice and liberation, when we strive for visibility, justice and access. When we dare to envision inclusive spaces. There is no definite answer here. No listicle I can give you or magical formula for how to fix the painful impact of the historical, cultural, intergenerational, and social trauma of the rigid gender binary. However, I believe they can start to notice the wound, engage with it critically, start to clean it up. Within and between ourselves we can start to plant seeds for another world of possibilities. This is a world in which we're connected to the past, where we do not deny or erase our history, but we do not get stuck in it. Rather we move forward, reclaiming what is ours and creating a new one was destroyed. This book is a long, open ended invitation to the stream of gender liberation for our collective healing. How will you respond?"

And so that is really the intention of this book, it is an invitation throughout. There are educational stretches I call them, there's those moments where I really want people to stretch beyond maybe what they've learned. There are clinical vignettes for people who are therapists. So it is very much focused on counselors and therapists but I've heard that people who are in education and other fields have really enjoyed reading it as well.

It is pretty accessible for the general public too, even though it is mostly aimed for academia. So if you want to find out more about the conversation we've had today, this is a good book to start from. You can go to my website, [.alexiantaffi.com](http://alexiantaffi.com). You can follow me on Twitter [@XTaffi](https://twitter.com/XTaffi). I think that's it. You can invite me on things. Invite me to your conference. Invite me to your podcast. I'm still waiting for a call from Oprah so that any of our books can go on her book club. But that's okay, I'll just keep putting it out there in the multiverse.

Jaia Bristow

You never know, maybe she'll be watching!

Thank you so much for your time today, Alex. I really appreciate it.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Thank you, Jaia. I appreciate you as ever.