



## Transcript: Episode 2

### **Tyranny of Gender: Lives Beyond He and She** *A Conversation with Dr. Petra Doan*

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**Elcin Haskollar:** Welcome to Diversity Talks. I'm Dr. Elcin Haskollar. I am your host. Support for this podcast comes from Florida State University's Center for Global Engagement and the President's Diversity and Inclusion Mini-Grant Program. Diversity Talks is a collection of conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion that impact our campus, our communities and beyond. Get ready to hear from leaders, from professors, from lawyers, and diversity officers as we uncover their stories and journeys. Each week, we're going to have a special guest and we'll share their unique experiences about how to create change.

**Petra Doan:** So the information I was getting from the media was, you know, if the media portrayed a trans person they were either a prostitute or a drug addict or a murderer, or horrible horrible crazed maniac in some way. I knew I wasn't any of those things. And so, you know, I really had to struggle with this sort of discontinuity between what society was telling me I must be and what I felt like when I felt I was.

**Elcin Haskollar:** Today, my guest is Dr. Petra Doan. Petra is a Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University. She is a change maker in the world. Over the past 3 decades, Petra has taught, conducted research, and served in a variety of different roles. Her teaching and research primarily focuses on planning issues surrounding marginalized communities with a special focus on the LGBTQ+ community. She is the author of two edited books and several journal articles. Currently, Petra's writing about the ways gender-neutral bathrooms have been politicized and how it's making life considerably more difficult for transgender and non-confirming individuals. Hi Petra!

**Petra Doan:** Hi Elcin!

**Elcin Haskollar:** Welcome to Diversity Talks.

Thank you so much for being here with me today. I want us to start this conversation by telling our audience a little bit about who you are. You're a brilliant faculty member and you've been at FSU for almost 30 years. I know that your students love you! Many of them find you "inspirational." And you are somebody who has fought really, really hard personally and professionally to be where you are today and also to create some a sense of equality for yourself and others in the LGBTQ+ community. I am so excited to talk to you and invite our audience to learn from your personal experiences. Petra - Can you please tell me about yourself? How would you describe your cultural identity? Would you share your story with our audience?

**Petra Doan:** To begin with, to understand my cultural identity, I think you have to clarify first a couple of key terms. I found that the phrase the 'tyranny of gender' is very useful in clarifying

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my particular location within the socio-cultural sphere. In my case, the experience of being transgender and non-conforming creates a special kind of tyranny. The tyranny of gender is what I call it. Now a lot of people also experience the tyranny of gender who may not be gender conforming. I think a lot of women experience the tyranny of gender in trying to live up to expectations of binary dichotomous world. But I'm going to be talking about those people who really don't fit within the binary.

**Elcin Haskollar:** Can you share any stories from your life that helped you come up with this concept? When did you first feel the tyranny of gender?"

**Petra Doan:** So in terms of my story and coming to terms with understanding how this tyranny of gender affected me. I knew at a very young age that I was different. At age 4, I remember having an epiphany moment playing dress-up with my cousin that I wanted to be a girl. I was supposed to be a girl in some way and yet in 1959 that was a very dangerous.

If I told my parents at the time that I needed to be a girl, they would likely have lovingly taking me to a therapist and the therapist might have used chemical aversion therapy were electroshock therapy to try to you know, straight me up and make me fly right. And that would likely have done profound psychological damage. I didn't fully understand that at age 4 but I knew I had to be careful because being gender different was not okay. There would have been a huge amount of social approbation dumped upon me and even as a 4-year-old, you kind of understand that.

So I spent literally years trying to hide my gender.

So I tried to just live into the gender that the cards that I thought I'd been dealt. I didn't know why I felt so differently, but I tried to live up to being what the world saw me as - that is as a man. I tried I played I played Sports. I was on the soccer team in high school and college. I went off to Peace Corps. I worked in West Africa. You know, I was perceived as one of those macho Peace Corps volunteers riding around on my motorcycle, you know living rough and you know, just interacting with the local populations in a culturally sensitive, but very male affect. But underneath, nothing had changed. I was the same person, still going through the same struggles, but I had learned to play a role.

**Elcin Haskollar:** So, what happened when you came back from the Peace Corps?

After Peace Corps, I went off to graduate school. And while I was writing my master's thesis and my dissertation on international development planning, I spent a lot of time in the graduate library trying to figure out what the heck was I.

So I read all these academic articles about cross-dressing, about transvestitism, about transsexuality. And you know, they were very dry articles to begin with and it was very hard for me to put myself in the in the middle of that, but I realized there were other people who struggled with gender as I did. And this was somewhat of ...some solace as I was struggling of how can I fit in?

Inspite of the gay and lesbian liberation movements in the 70s and 80s, trans people weren't included. There was very little public acknowledgement about gender non-conforming

individuals. So the information I was getting from the media was, you know, if the media portrayed a trans person they were either a prostitute or a drug addict or a murderer, or horrible horrible crazed maniac in some way. I knew I wasn't any of those things. And so, you know, I really had to struggle with this sort of discontinuity between what society was telling me I must be and what I felt like when I felt I was.

**Elcin Haskollar:** Wow! I just cannot imagine the stress, the mental torture of seeing you and your community being portrayed like this. Then what happened when you got a faculty position at Florida State University when to the external world, you were still biologically male. How did you find solidarity in Tallahassee? Could you please talk about that?

**Petra Doan:** After I was hired to teach planning for developing nations in FSU, I worked very hard to get a publication agenda, to get my teaching portfolio sufficient so that I could get promoted to associate professor and get tenure. And I did. But along the way I found that I needed to find trans support groups. I first went to Charlotte, North Carolina. Then I went to Atlanta to find it and eventually I got comfortable enough that I could I could a local support group here in Tallahassee. It was pretty scary because people might discover something about me, but I knew that I had to have support and I knew that others needed support as well.

Once I got tenure, I felt it with a security I could feel the walls that I'd constructed between my external identity and my internal identity begin to crumble. I just couldn't make it work anymore to sort of be this person that felt like I had no authenticity to be. I needed to be - what in the trans community sometimes we talk about - as I needed to be my true self. This self that I had known, the truth that I had known about myself since I was 4 years old.

But it was still difficult. Because I used to watch, you know gay pride events. Well, then they became gay and lesbian pride. Took a lot of infighting within the queer community to add lesbians and then to add bisexuals and trans folks got, you know left out for all the longest time. Even at FSU, FSU Pride was gay pride and then it was gay and lesbian pride, and then they added bi- and finally just before I came out they added trans to the title. And of course now our local group is the Pride Student Union. Which feels to me like it's an okay way to call it, but I kind of miss having trans in title. But that's another, that's another issue.

**Elcin Haskollar:** When did you decide to come out? What was the process like?

When I decided to come out, I realized I just couldn't, I couldn't exist in this sort of bimodal manner. But when I did there was no anti-discrimination policy at FSU inclusive of sexual orientation, much less gender identity. So it felt like a huge risk, but I had to come out. So I told my ... took two of my senior colleagues off for coffee and one of them was the outgoing chair of the department, the other was the incoming chair of the department. Both of whom have now gone off to greater positions elsewhere.

And they were shocked. I guess I did a pretty good job of persuading people of my male persona. Even though that didn't feel like who I was. They were shocked and said well, "I guess the university is a pretty good place for someone like you to transition and they didn't think it would affect my position given that I had tenure." They didn't think they could, you know there would

be any adverse consequences. But it was still quite difficult. One of the things that was quite difficult was the bathroom issue.

So I agreed with my department chair at the time, that I would not use the women's restroom. I could no longer use the men's restroom after I came out, and I would use a handicap bathrooms. At that point, my office was on the third floor of the Bellamy building and on the second floor of the Bellamy building there was a handicap bathroom with one of those things that you push to for the door to open, but there was no lock on the door.

And so that was the bathroom I had to use once I transitioned, And you know, if a student came up and bumped that button the door would open. Now, this is a horrible thing for any person who had to use that handicapped bathroom, but for a trans person this was even more of an embarrassment and was extremely difficult.

So after six months, I went to my chair. I said, "Please can I now use the women's restroom because people now see me as a woman." And my chair said let me talk to the uni...let me talk to the dean. And I was called down to the Dean's - and this dean is not at the university either-called down to the Dean's office with a university attorney and the chief of police. And they said, "we've studied this and under no uncertain terms, you may not use the women's restroom until such time as you have had a gender confirmation surgery."

And I said, "I can't use the men's restroom looking like this." And they said, "Well you can use the handicap bathrooms." I explained the problem with the handicap bathrooms and that was eventually fixed so that now handicap bathrooms do have a lock on them for everybody's safety. And but you know, so for the next three years I had to use handicapped bathrooms. I asked them if they'd let me have a handicapped parking sticker too and they said, "No no, no, you're not actually handicapped, you just have to use the handicap bathroom."  
(mumbles) Okay.

**Elcin Haskollar:** You know, I feel like I now understand why you are so passionate about researching, writing and raising awareness about the importance of having gender neutral bathrooms and how this issue is so politicized. But at the same time, it could make life so difficult for transgender people. Can you please tell me about your first day at FSU as a transwoman? You came to the Bellamy building wearing a skirt. What were the reactions?

**Petra Doan:** The first day I came out on came out in the Bellamy building was a very strange day. As I entered the building, I felt like I was in the eye of a hurricane. I was at the calm center of this turbulent storm raging all around me. I could hear people as I walked down the hall I could hear people suddenly gasp and then (in low tone) get silent. And then as I walk past, I'd here (makes garbled sound), "Did you see that? Oh my God." And everyone sort of looked at the freakshow that I had created.

But luckily people told me how brave I was, and I don't think I was brave. I think I was just being who I needed to be. But luckily some other scandal came along after a couple of weeks and I was no longer felt that sort of eye of the hurricane a feeling, but it was very strange.

I had one colleague who came up to me. I had one former student who came up to me and said, “You’re my very first transsexual.” And I went, “Ah gee.” I wonder how do you respond to that? So these events were quite challenging but you know, I want to be very clear. I am very cognizant that my coming-out experience difficult as it may have been; is grounded in a very complex web of privilege. Including my tenured faculty position, my white racial identity, my upper middle class upbringing - all of these things gave me the strength, the ability, the privilege if you will - to be successful in this process.

And I am very aware that many many of my trans brothers and sisters, do not have as much privilege as I have and have experienced some really horrible things. I’ve never been gender bashed. But I’ve been sexually assaulted in an elevator in a hotel by a drunken man who was offended by my nonconformity. I’ve had people scream at me in the street, point their finger at me and and and tell me how depraved I am. But I have not been murdered. I have not been horribly assaulted - I was assaulted - but it was not life-threatening, and I count my lucky stars. Many of my brothers and sisters have not had that.

**Elcin Haskollar:** You talked about this a little bit, but I think that it is extremely important that you talk about this concept of the tyranny of gender and understanding gender based on these dichotomous terms. Right, man and woman. And in the classes that I teach, I always try to get my students to understand that across different cultures. Many of them recognize gender beyond these dichotomous definitions, and they’re able to recognize the multiplicity of different genders. And I think this is really, really important. So for 42 years, you grew a beard, you played soccer, you volunteered for the Peace Corps, you got married and had kids, you received your PhD, then you were able to land on a tenure track position, which is an incredible achievement in itself. And you did all of these things as a biological man. So my question to you is, as a professor, as a researcher, as a trans-woman, “how has your personal story, and all of these things that you just told me and told our audience, shaped your perspective on diversity, equity and inclusion?”

**Petra Doan:** I guess what I would say to that is that I have tried to channel... So, Susan Stryker, who is a very famous trans-historian, wrote an important piece talking about transgender rage that she felt at so much discrimination. I’ve tried to channel that transgender rage that I sometimes feel into being a very visible, very vocal, very loud as well advocate for anyone who’s trans, for any other group who’s LGBTQ+ that is suffering from discrimination issues, intolerance issues.

Let me be clear that, you know, and thank you for that beautiful description of the beautiful diversity of gender that we find across the globe, which I have found always to be so helpful. I mean, one of the things I’ve found helpful to think about is gender giftedness, because in our Native American traditions, people who were recognized as Two Spirit, their identities were gifts from the great spirit which they would experience in a quest. And so, to think of gender giftedness is sort of way of trying to give back, and to be visible, to be positive, and to integrate this in my work, in my research, in my public speaking which I do quite a bit of.

I think that we need to sort of really reconfigure our thinking, but I also think we need to be very cognizant that even the very categories that we are talking about are shifting. For instance, even the term “trans-gender” is now a term that is complex. You know, when I was doing my research

40 plus years ago, you were either a transvestite or transsexual. Transgender hadn't been identified, haven't been invented yet as a category, but there are now many people who don't identify as transgender. They identify as gender nonconforming, as gender queer, as not fitting the dichotomy as I don't fit the dichotomy.

Now let me be clear, I identify as a trans-woman, but my sense of my womanly-ness includes my size, my voice, and so many of my characteristics that aren't stereotypically feminine, because I am sick and tired of the tyranny of gender and I'm going to be the women that I know I am myself to be. To heck with what society thinks I should be. And so in that sense, what I try to do is live my life as an example, as a visible example. And over the year I've had many FSU students come and talk to me about their own gender issues, and I've simply tried to be an example. Not that they would follow my particular example, but just to reinforce for them that they need to follow their own authentic sense of self.

**Elcin Haskollar:** I think that you're setting a beautiful example for the FSU students, for the FSU faculty and staff. And one thing that people need to understand is that these are real issues impacting real people. A couple of years ago, we had an incident here in Tallahassee where an elementary school teacher wrote a letter informing the parents that the teacher wanted to the parents to use gender neutral pronouns, and it caused an uproar and a controversy. So, from your perspective, how can we help people understand and learn about the important of pronouns? That is not just a phase, again an important issue impacting real lives.

**Petra Doan:** Well, so I've spent a lot of time thinking about that. I have sort of converted my research agenda from planning and developing areas to planning for marginalized communities. Particularly, those who are marginalized because of their LGBTQ+ identity. And it seems to me that, one of the most important things is growing up I never seen or had knowledge of anyone who was trans. I wasn't aware of people who were gay, although I come to find out I knew quite a few people who were gay, but it wasn't in my sort of awareness.

One of the things that scholars who've looked at the incredible change that's happened over the last, let's say, 40-50 years with the LGBTQ community, is what convinces people that this change is not horrible and terrifying, is when people that they know are open about their identity. And so, all I can say is—I met the individual that you are talking about at a trans rally, and it's a very compelling story—the way to change people's hearts and minds is for them to meet people who are differently gendered, for them to understand. Which is why I'm very happy to be on this podcast. I don't understand why my gender is the way it is, I can't make sense of it, but I have learned that it is who I am, and it's who I've been for many, many years and hiding only serves to make me very depressed, at times suicidal. And coming to terms with myself is what enabled me to be a fully activated human being with compassion for so many other people.

So, all I can say in terms of what do we do about making people be more sensitive about pronouns is it is just viably important that we create spaces where people can understand the trans community, and you know, as that former student that came up to me and said, "you're my very first transsexual," well if everyone has that very first trans person that they know, and meet, and love, it makes an incredible difference. And the other things... so my son is a middle school teacher. One of the things he tells me is that among his students, there are incredible numbers,

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relatively class of 25 students, and there are 2 or 3 students in his class who prefer to have their classmate use they/them pronouns. Something is different with their gender and they, you know, in middle school feel that the need for that identity to be expressed. Change is happening. The folks who are coming up in schools right now, I think because there has been enough visibility, are much freer to express their identities at a much younger age. This teacher, primary school teacher, who had the courage to ask the students to prefer to them with they/them pronouns was huge. Change is happening, there are forces that wouldn't happen, but I think change is happening, and I think the change is a great blessing.

**Elcin Haskollar:** You mention that you had to know your true self, that because you couldn't be who you were, that those thoughts made you suicidal. So, I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about this need for diversity and inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community. Specifically, in urban planning because this is something you talk about in your own work. And in your edited book, "Planning and LGBT Communities," you talk about this need for queer spaces, that there are a range of people, not just gay men, lesbians, trans-men, trans-women, but also others that identify as queer. And that, they all need urban spaces to congregate, and they need these urban spaces to be safe, and to be inclusive. From your perspective, why is it important to have safe, queer spaces? What potential issues do you see when sexuality and urban spaces interact.

**Petra Doan:** Well, queer people have always existed in cities, but they have always been relegated to the dark corners. The dock areas where sailors would get off a ship and go find either sexual favors or would just find a hotel to hook up with other people, whether they were male or female. And so, these activities have always happened in cities, but they have been kept in the dark corners.

So, what began to happen in the 70s, with the gay liberation movement and the other liberation movements that followed, is people began being more open about creating gay neighborhoods. And these places were very important places, very iconic, the Castro in San Francisco is an iconic queer space, but very gay, and very white, and very upper-class. Because a young queer person couldn't afford to be there, and particularly a young person of color might not even feel welcomed in that queer space. So, what we need is to go beyond the "gayborhood" model, and we need to be able to create spaces that are really inclusive of people across the ethnic and racial boundaries, across a whole range of gender identities, where people can come to terms with themselves.

When I was coming out, I would go to Atlanta. I'd go to Midtown, which is Atlanta's gayborhood, and there I could go to a restaurant, I could go to a bar as myself, and it was incredibly important for me. So, these spaces are really important for people to be able to find their identities, but they are under a great deal of pressure. The planning community, which is part of what that book is about, the planning community has been very squeamish about taking on issues of sexuality and gender difference. In part because planners work underneath the city council, or city commission, underneath officials who can often be very sensitive to public opinion. And so, planners in Atlanta, for instance, planning for the Midtown area simply knew it was a historic gayborhood, but they plan for its redevelopment and in all of the planning documents that I've looked over, there was not a single mention that this was a historic gayborhood where many gay men, many lesbians also visited and spent time there. Many people

of color would go there as well. It was never discussed, and so what happened is that the redevelopment pressure happened to shut down most of the gay bars, and the area is still a gayborhood but is dramatically changed. It is much whiter. The planners even use codewords like, “we need to make this area ‘safe’ for families.” Now in the queer community, we talk about, “Oh, is he family? Is she family?” Meaning, “Are they part of the community?” But that’s not what the planners were using, they were talking about making this safe for heterosexual families who would be offended if they saw two men holding hands, or two women kissing, or much less a trans person whose gender they couldn’t understand.

And so, part of my work has been to try to call out planning that has not been inclusive of LGBTQ people, and to highlight the importance of having these spaces because frankly the suicide rate for LGBTQ people is among the highest in the country for this subpopulation. People are often kicked out of their homes if a child in a conservative family, politically or religiously conservative family, is gay or is trans. They may no longer be welcome, they may be kicked out, they may become homeless, they may not have a place to go or find safety. And if there isn’t a community that can sort of embrace them and create space for them, then they’re at severe risk of great harm. And so, these spaces are really important, and that’s what I’ve done a lot of my work on.

**Elcin Haskollar:** And so then, what can people do if they want to incorporate more diversity and inclusion in their work? What would be your recommendations to newcomers?

**Petra Doan:** So, for newcomers, I think the important... I think it’s a like a phase shift, if we think about diversity, equity, and inclusion work particularly with the LGBT community, it’s not something that many people perhaps coming from areas of white privilege or class privilege have to think about. And so, what I like to think of it as is that it is a phase shift, it is a lens that people have to use. How do you develop that lens? You listen.

I teach my students in my introductory Growth and Development of Cities class at the master’s level to look at the city around them, and not just drive by, but to slow down and really observe what’s happening. Look at who’s there, recognizes who’s not there. What kinds of people are not in spaces, and ask yourself, “why?” So, part of continuing to include diversity, equity, and inclusion is to really begin to listen and to pay attention to who’s there and who’s not there. And why aren’t they there? And what are the reasons why a particular subpopulation might not be in your survey? Maybe because you surveyed an entirely white, upper middle-class neighborhood. But if you’re going to do good planning work, you need to survey the neighborhood that’s just down the street. Yes, it might be a little less convenient. It might be perceived to be a little more dangerous, though that might not be my experience of it because it’s different. So, you might have to sort of just begin to shift your lenses, do a phase shift and recognize that there’s a much bigger world out there than say perhaps what your background has brought you to. And there’s also some self-reflection, reflecting about self-privilege. You know, understanding white privilege. You know, understanding class privilege. Understanding male privilege. And beginning to unpack that can cause a phase shift, and I think many people can be important allies if they’re open to recognizing the importance of that kind of phase shift.

**Elcin Haskollar:** Absolutely, and I think what you are saying here is a pretty powerful message that diversity and inclusion starts with listening, and understanding, and empathizing with other people and their perspectives, and doing a little bit of self-reflection to be able to see the intersectionality of how all of these issues come together and impact of lives, but especially impact the lives of others. Any final thoughts?

**Petra Doan:** Well, the final thought that came to me as you were just talking there is was that... So, one of the things that was very helpful for me when I went to Peace Corps, I was the only white person in my West African village within maybe 50 miles. And what I realized is it was so weird to be picked out as different every step of the day. I would walk out in the morning, and people would be singing a little song, [*sings song*], it was very annoying, but I realized I had a lot of privilege as a white American. And I did not suffer discrimination, but I could not be invisible. When I got back to the States, I realized what it must be like for a person of color to move through a white neighborhood. Just the way I felt, except I had privilege. People, when they saw me, did not think I was going to rob, or murder, or do terrible things to other people's families. And so, that sort of learning that I did in Peace Corps, sort of about visibility, and difference, and privilege, were I think very important lessons to me. That then when I began really thinking of my trans-ness, where it really began to really just sort of open me up to a different world. And so, I think other people can do that same kind of sort of self-transformation. They don't need to change their gender, they don't need to change their identity, but they might need to do a little transformation, which I think is helpful for almost all of us.

**Elcin Haskollar:** Petra, thank you so much for your time, and for being here with me today, and speaking to our audience. Maybe people might read about the issues and the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community on the news and on social media. And I'm just really happy that we're able to give this opportunity to our audience to listen to your story, and to hear about your personal experiences. And also, how you hard you had to fight your entire life to get to where you are today. I think these conversations are incredibly valuable, your message is incredibly important to provide a completely different perspective. And politics aside, your story and what you told us today makes us realize that these are real issues affecting real people and real lives. And I feel like I'm a better person for having this conversation with you today, and I personally would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

**Petra Doan:** Thank you for asking me. That's a lovely thing to say, but I'm very appreciative for being allowed to share my story with you and with you audience. Thank you.

**Elcin Haskollar:** And that concludes our interview with Dr. Petra Doan. You can find all of our episodes, transcripts and lots of resources on our website at [cge.fsu.edu/diversitytalks](http://cge.fsu.edu/diversitytalks). Thank you for tuning in and thank you for listening to folks who make diversity and inclusion possible. We hope that these episodes will help you honor diversity and practice inclusion. See you next time!

You can catch our next episode in mid-March where I'll talk to Dr. Steve McDowell, Assistant Provost for International Initiatives at Florida State University. We'll talk about diversity and inclusion of international students and discuss what it means to internationalize a university campus.

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