



SEXUALITY &
GENDER DIVISION

6 July 2022

Open Letter to the Editor of the South African Jewish Report: Adam Sachs’ “There’s no Pride to be found in gender ideology” should be retracted and an apology for publication issued.

We write this letter on behalf of the Sexuality and Gender Division (SGD) of the Psychological Society of South Africa, in partnership with PATHSA (the Professional Association for Transgender Health South Africa) and the Mental Health & Gender Initiative, KwaZulu-Natal.

When we read Adam Sachs op-ed, *There’s no Pride to be found in gender ideology*, published in the South African Jewish Report (SAJR) on 30 June 2022, our first response was to think that this op-ed was a satirical column on the international month of Pride. We thought it would eventually become a sombre reflection about the everyday [violence](#) that the LGBTQIA+ community, especially [gender-diverse people](#), continue to face, and that it would end with a call to build communities and societies which offer all people dignity, including sexually and gender diverse people, who are among the most marginalised. Unfortunately, however, it appears Sachs was being deadly serious in his crude stereotyping and disinformation.

While we recognise his personal right to hold ill-informed and scientifically unsubstantiated opinions, we ask why the SAJR has given both a public platform and legitimacy to Sachs’ discriminatory and hateful opinion piece. The SAJR is a prominent and widely-read news platform of the South African Jewish community, and has a long history of publishing work which combats unsubstantiated antisemitism. The SAJR and its community of readers understand the power of misinformation and how it can come to inform hatefulness and degradation towards people who inhabit an “othered” identity in the public imagination and discourse. It is in this sense that the SAJR should know better and, in turn, do better when exercising editorial discretion when publicly platforming discriminatory views.

From the outset, we must emphasise that there are multiple false claims made by Sachs in the op-ed. However, we want to focus on the empirically ill-informed basis at its core, and its prejudicial and discriminatory inflection.

First, at the heart of the opinion piece is an attempt by Sachs to separate what he refers to as the “biological reality of sex differences” from “gender”. In doing so, Sachs casts gender, broadly, as well as gender identification, gender expression, and gender transition, more specifically, as, in his words, a “belief system” or “ideology”, all the while leaving the apparent “biological reality” of sex (and sex dimorphism) conveniently intact and unquestioned.

What Sachs then does is frame the biology of sex and sexual differences as somehow static, ultimately predicated on two biologically sexed bodies, namely, “male” and “female”. For Sachs, it is this version of biological sex that must now act as the guiding star for our approach to thinking about gender and, in

particular, the gendered identification and gendered life experiences of trans people. It is important to correct this understanding by highlighting that there is in fact no “biological reality” to sex or sex differences in the way that Sachs is narrowly appearing to suggest.

Indeed, much like the psycho-social experience and articulation of one’s gender, biological sex is much queerer and more complex than the sexual binary of male-female that we have all historically thought and traditionally been taught. It is not, “[g]ender theory [which] would have us believe that biological sex differences between men and women don’t really exist”, as Sachs claims. Rather, it is [biological science](#) which has already established that the genetic, neuro-chemical, and anatomical expressions of sex are far more diverse than we think, and are better thought of as occurring on a fluid [spectrum](#), as opposed to a two-sex binary.

What the leading [science](#) tells us is that the experience and expression of one’s sex and gender are deeply intertwined with one another and not neatly separable, as Sachs purports, and, moreover, that sex and gender are, at the same time, far more varied and diverse than Sachs cares to acknowledge.

Second, we want to say that [words matter](#). We represent a number of organisations working in the fields of sexuality, gender diversity and gender justice, as well as sexual health and rights, and we are all too aware that hateful speech has consequences. [Data](#) indicate that 82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide, with suicidality highest among transgender youth. And some of the factors that exacerbate this risk in young trans people include lack of belonging in school, emotional neglect by family and internalised self-stigma.

The world is toxic, to use Sachs’ word, for trans and gender diverse people. We also note here that many gay and lesbian people, the same people he says we should not oppress, mistreat or be prejudiced against, present in the world in a gender diverse way, and will have been hurt or humiliated for their gender non-conformity. Some empathy for this, and by extension those in our communities who feel a disconnect with the sex they were assigned at birth as they grow up, would be appropriate. We could include in this intersex people, who are still to this day, in some parts of the world, exposed to harmful surgical interventions because they are wrongly assigned a sex at birth. So yes, self-definition matters; identity is, and we quote Sachs, “something you simply are”.

Third, in contrast to Sachs’ assertion that social services will force parents to affirm their child’s identity, and cause irreversible harm, global access to affirming services and therapies is scarce and waiting lists, where they even exist, are long. In the United States there are increasing attempts to limit or ban these services, despite the fact that [data](#) from studies of more than 30,000 transgender and gender-diverse young people consistently show that access to gender-affirming care is associated with better mental health outcomes – and that lack of access to such care is associated with higher rates of suicidality, depression and self-harming behaviour.

Fourth, the various professions involved in supporting a trans child have complex and drawn out ethical processes which guide their work – questions about a child or teen’s [capacity to consent](#), for example, are debated, discussed and dissected at length. There is no sinister cabal forcing trans youth into mutilating or harmful interventions, rather there are scattered global services trying their best to support anxious and confused parents and teenagers often in emotional distress. Teens who, usually for many years, have been insistent, persistent and consistent in expressing ideas about their gender as different from their sex

assigned at birth. Let us be clear, any decisions about trans youth and hormonal interventions are deeply considered ones, they are never rushed or forced, and to suggest otherwise is wrong and an untruth.

Finally, on a note of politics and organising, there are indeed tensions in LGBTQIA+ activism – the “alphabet people”, as Sachs says scornfully. In spite of these, one useful aspect of trans inclusive queer organising is that there is a common enemy, the system of patriarchy which oppresses not only women, but LGBTQIA+ people too. Moreover, trans inclusive queer organising has implications for people beyond the LGBTQIA+ community, because this kind of cross-community solidarity activism centres the fundamental right of dignity for *all* people. The gay rights Sachs feels so passionately about were in fact the ultimate result of trans activists pushing back against police brutality in the famous Stonewall riots. The gender diverse members of all our communities are often a lightning rod for stigma and harm because they challenge the status quo: we owe them a debt of gratitude, not gratuitous insults. They are the allies of LGB people and we should fight their struggle too.

Sachs’ op-ed is a hurtful and discriminatory diatribe, presenting itself as valid opinion and evidence-based insight warranting public debate. We believe this kind of bigoted invective is neither insightful nor in need of further public debate. And it does not reflect current evidence. To this effect, we ask that the editor of the SAJR publish this letter as a corrective to Sachs’ op-ed, issue an apology and retract the piece. We believe it creates a climate for people to justify and rationalise anti-queer and transphobic discrimination or violence.

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Endorsed by:

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