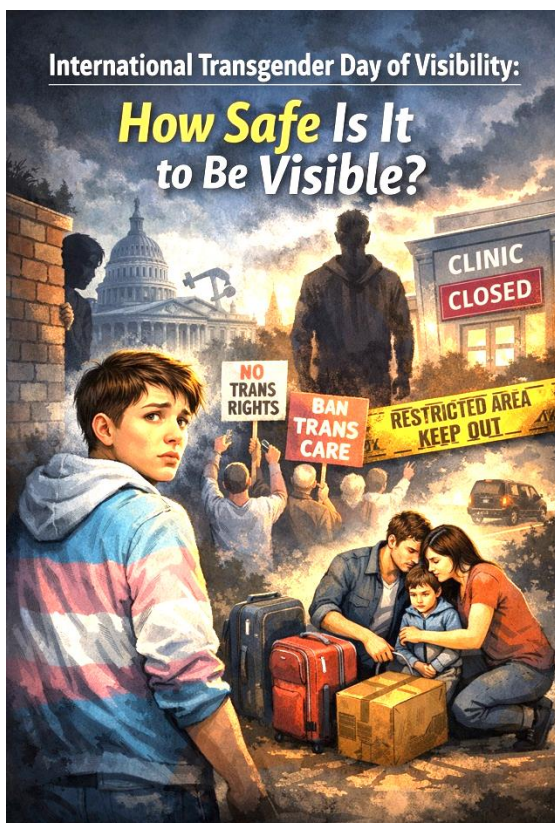




## How safe is it to be visible?



International Transgender Day of Visibility invites celebration, but it also raises a more difficult question: how safe is it to be visible?

For many trans and gender diverse people, visibility has never been simple. It has always carried a degree of risk. Yet in the current global climate that risk feels increasingly real. As the political landscape shifts, particularly in the United States, we are witnessing new and troubling ways in which trans and gender diverse people are being pushed to survive rather than to live fully and openly. What began as attacks focused largely on trans and gender diverse youth has rapidly expanded. Healthcare providers have been targeted, and increasingly trans adults themselves are being drawn into legal and political battles over their right simply to exist.

Across several states in the United States, trans and gender diverse people are retreating from public life.

Many are becoming less visible, withdrawing from spaces where they once felt able to live openly. Others are leaving their country altogether, seeking places where safety, dignity and

the basic right to exist are not constantly under threat. Families are relocating, professionals are reconsidering their futures, and communities are quietly trying to find ways to survive an environment that has become deeply uncertain. Against this backdrop, the question of visibility becomes more complex. It is no longer only about pride or recognition. It is also about safety.

For some of us, however, the boat has already sailed. Many of us carry digital footprints that cannot simply be erased. We have worked publicly in the field of gender-affirming healthcare. We have spoken, written, taught and advocated. We have supported trans and gender diverse people to become who they have always known themselves to be. We have walked alongside individuals as they claimed their identities and their futures. In doing so, we have also been visible. That visibility has often been a deliberate choice – part of the struggle for dignity, recognition and freedom. Yet in the current climate, even those who have long stood in these spaces are feeling the shifting ground beneath them.

Trans and gender diverse people are not asking for special rights. They are asking to be treated in the same way that cisgender people are treated – with dignity, with safety, and with equal protection under the law. They are asking to live their lives without their existence becoming a political battleground. The right to healthcare, to education, to employment, and to safety should not be controversial. Yet increasingly these basic human rights are being questioned in public discourse.

In South Africa, our Constitution remains one of the strongest safeguards of dignity and equality in the world. It provides a powerful framework for the protection of marginalised communities, including trans and gender diverse people. Yet constitutional protections do not automatically translate into social acceptance. We are beginning to see the emergence of ideological movements, sometimes supported by political voices, that question whether these protections should fully include trans and gender diverse people. Within these narratives, trans and gender diversity is dismissed as something that does not exist, reframed as pathology, or even described in moralistic and religious language as something deviant or demonic. These claims are not new, but they are becoming more organised and more visible.

Such narratives have real consequences. They shape how people think about gender diversity. They influence policy debates, institutional practices and the everyday experiences of trans and gender diverse people in schools, healthcare spaces and communities. When people's identities

are framed as illegitimate or dangerous, it becomes easier to justify exclusion, discrimination and violence.

This raises an important challenge for psychology professionals. How do we respond in ways that are ethical, responsible and grounded in our commitment to human dignity? Too often psychology imagines its role as confined to the therapy room, yet our professional responsibilities extend far beyond that space. Supporting clients does not only involve providing care within clinical encounters. It also requires advocating for the human rights and freedoms that allow our clients to live meaningful and authentic lives.

For those of us working in academic spaces, the questions are equally pressing. Do our teaching practices and research frameworks reflect the diversity of the communities we serve? Or do our forms, surveys and institutional systems still assume that there are only two gender options – male or female, woman or man? When students or research participants are required to choose between categories that do not reflect their realities, a subtle but powerful message is communicated about whose existence is recognised and whose is not.

Sometimes the smallest changes matter profoundly. Adding a gender diverse option on a form may seem like a minor administrative adjustment, yet it signals recognition. Greeting students in ways that acknowledge more than two gender possibilities can affirm the presence of those who have often felt unseen. Designing research tools that recognise gender diversity creates space for knowledge that more accurately reflects human experience. These everyday practices may appear small, but collectively they contribute to a broader culture of visibility and respect.

Visibility, in this sense, is not only about public celebration or symbolic gestures. It is also about the daily practices through which institutions acknowledge that trans and gender diverse people exist. When a student sees their identity reflected in a form, a lecture, or a research project, they receive a quiet but powerful message: you belong here, and your existence is recognised.

On International Transgender Day of Visibility we often focus on celebration. Celebration is important. Yet it is equally important to recognise the courage that visibility often requires. Around the world, trans and gender diverse people have increasingly become the scapegoats of political anger and ideological fear. Their lives are debated, legislated and scrutinised in ways that few other groups experience.

Visibility, therefore, is not only about being seen. It is also about resilience. It is about continuing to affirm that trans and gender diverse people exist, that their lives have value, and that their humanity cannot be erased by political rhetoric or ideological hostility. The work of affirmation continues in clinics, classrooms, research spaces and communities.

Perhaps this is what visibility ultimately asks of us: not only to recognise trans and gender diverse people, but to stand alongside them in the ongoing work of creating societies where people do not merely survive, but are able to live openly, safely and with dignity.

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