



ZERO DISCRIMINATION DAY 1 MARCH

Zero Discrimination Day: A call for enacting the Constitution in everyday life

Zero Discrimination Day was celebrated internationally on 1 March under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). The overarching aim of this day is to promote equality and social inclusion by dismantling all forms of discrimination. The 2026 theme, **"People first"**, is particularly poignant in the South African context, which is characterised by multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, despite the constitution's legal protections for its citizens. The 2026 theme, promoted by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), highlights "the persistent discrimination faced by people living with and at risk of HIV, discrimination that undermines access to health services, [and] violates rights" (<https://www.unaids.org/en/2026-zero-discrimination-day>).

Access to quality, timely and equitable healthcare is a key indicator of the extent to which socioeconomic inequalities perpetuate cycles of discrimination and oppression. In South Africa, the enduring legacy of structural inequalities created by the apartheid government translates to public healthcare systems that continue to be raced, gendered and classed, reflecting systems that further stigmatise and oppress marginalised groups and individuals.

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People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) face various forms of discrimination and stigma daily as they navigate the healthcare system, more so if they are economically disadvantaged and from rural areas. The question of access is a critical one for LGBTQIA+ people, as services should be rendered and accessed in spaces that are safe and free of judgement and discrimination. However, this is often not the case. A recently published cross-sectional survey of transgender and gender-diverse people in the Eastern and Western Cape provinces of South Africa demonstrates a critical gap between needed and actual access to legal and medical gender-affirming care services, including access to psychosocial support (<https://samajournals.co.za/index.php/samj/article/view/3253>).

Importantly, the survey foregrounds the linkages between access to gender-affirming healthcare (GAHC) and access to opportunities within the economic and social sectors. The uneven access to GAHC further marginalises individuals who are vulnerable due to poverty and unemployment.

Discrimination that targets people based on their sexuality or gender, or people perceived to be queer, is evident in other institutions as well. Behaviours and comments that include judgement, discrimination, and social stigma often act as barriers that discourage LGBTQIA+ people from reporting incidents of violence and accessing medical and psychosocial support, especially when they do not validate queer identities.

The mental health effects of stigma and discrimination on queer populations have been well-documented in the minority stress literature, which also draws attention to the intersections of stigma and discrimination with multiple marginalised identities. The alarming rise of queerphobic bullying at schools in South Africa brings into sharp focus the increased vulnerability of queer adolescents.

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Sadly, in some instances, the psychological burden (feelings of shame and alienation, anxiety, depression, and suicide ideation) of bullying becomes too much to bear for the victims. Tiro Moalusi, Lukhanyo Jongqo, and Mpho Falithenjwa all died by suicide, marking the gravity and cost of unjustifiable discrimination that targets LGBTQIA+ people.

The theme **“People first”** is a powerful reminder of humanity and human dignity. There is an urgent and critical need for South Africa, as a society that values the rights enshrined in the Constitution, to enact its Constitution in everyday practice. We must promote non-discrimination in our everyday interactions with others, and we must advocate for institutions that are non-discriminatory and validate all people's diversity.

Psychologists are not just frontline mental health practitioners. They also interpret, explain, and influence human behaviour, guided by their understanding of the power of social forces. They are therefore also positioned on the frontline of anti-discrimination work and advocacy. Zero Discrimination Day thus has a special resonance for psychology professionals, as it highlights their role in promoting equality and addressing biases that affect marginalised communities.

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