

Universities have a major role in tackling transphobia, creating equality for gender-diverse

By [Sivuyisiwe Magayana](#)

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South Africa is one of the most progressive countries in advancing the rights of sexual and gender minorities in Africa, and its Constitution was the first in the world to prohibit unfair discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. But even though South Africa's Constitution guarantees all citizens' rights, many factors still conspire to make transgender and gender-diverse persons particularly vulnerable to life-threatening marginalisation, oppression, violence, and exclusion. Some of these factors include access to education, socioeconomic status, health status, stigma, housing, and discrimination.



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On account of these and many other factors, the delicate topic of how South African communities and institutions of higher learning treat sexual and gender minorities, particularly the transgender community, is one area that still demands considerable attention. Transgender and gender-diverse students continue to be marginalised, neglected, mistreated, harassed, and silenced because of their gender identity; as a result, universities must develop policies and tactics to combat transphobia and transcend the gender binary.

A spiral of exclusion and marginalisation

University communities around the world have seen an increase in the number of persons who identify as transgender, gender-diverse and non-binary. As a result they have experienced equally increased enrolment of trans and gender-diverse students. However, it appears that universities are not comprehensively ready to meet the needs of trans and gender-diverse students. While universities acknowledge trans and gender-diverse people, they do so in ways that sustain societal beliefs of underlying gender distinctions and heterosexuality.

South African institutions are largely heteronormative, resulting in an institutional setting that is not prepared to meet the needs of transgender and gender-diverse people. Institutions continue to operate under the premise of catering to cisgendered individuals, subjecting those who deviate from this to institutional and social alienation and discrimination. Institutions are fixated on societal distinctions between men and women, which are a primary source of social categorisation and, as a result, feed differentiation and inequality in everyday cultural practice and processes. The binary categorisation excludes transgender and gender-diverse people. Not only is this categorisation hostile, but it also silences and erases the above-mentioned individuals.



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As a result, trans and gender-diverse persons experience multiple forms of marginalisation, exclusion, and discrimination in institutions of higher learning, including being denied access to or questioned within campus housing and facilities, harassment, bullying, and alienation – because of their gender identity and expression. Moreover, trans students are faced with being exposed to university systems that lack knowledge about trans persons and issues altogether, including challenges with their forms, such as applications that do not recognise and cater for students that identify outside of the gender binary.

Exclusion and marginalisation are also evident in the lack of gender-inclusive residences and facilities, which demonstrates resistance and slow progress towards inclusivity. As a result, some trans students are subjected to aggressive treatment in residences because of a life they did not choose. For instance, trans students who identify as transmen must be placed in women's residences because their official documents still reflect that they are female; similarly, transwomen are placed in male residences. This placement system exposes them to bullying, harassment, and violence from other students who do not “feel at ease” or “safe” among transgender people – because they do not understand the concept of “transitioning”.

Also, in cases where students must share a room, cisgender female students are paired with transmen in female residences, and when the former expresses any discomfort or feelings of unsafety, the transgender or gender-diverse is more likely to be removed and placed in another residence; it is never the other way around. For people who identify as transgender or gender-diverse, this requires an ongoing negotiation of space.

Trans persons are evidently caught in a spiral of exclusion and marginalisation, as they are often rejected – not just by their families, but also by the system and by the very institutions that are supposed to equally advance and cater for everyone, regardless of their gender identity, sex, and sexual orientation.



Image source: Sharon McOutcheon from [Pexels](#)

Violence and invisibility

Despite South Africa's constitutional and legislative provisions against discrimination based on gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation, transgender people continue to be violated and become victims of transphobic violence and discrimination. These acts are motivated by society's preconceived notions of what a trans person's gender identity should and should not be. For example, our communities and our institutions of higher learning currently represent a stern heterosexual matrix in which a hegemonic social order posits that all persons should and/or must have a set gender and sexual identity.

This creates a scenario in which those who present gender diversity are perceived to be foreign, “responsible for the collapse of African traditional values” or “un-African”, and are shamed and become victims of violence because they are “not God’s creation”. Many in our society believe that being transgender is a violation of “God's natural order and creation”, which then exposes people outside the gender binary to varying forms and levels of physical, verbal, and emotional violence. These forms of violence impact and trample on their human rights and dignity, self-esteem, and academic progress. As a result, universities lose these students to other institutions that they perceive to be better, more inviting, transformed, and inclusive.

For their safety and well-being, trans persons hide and remain invisible to avoid violence, bullying, and discrimination. They do this because society and institutions want them to exist in silence so that the “natural” order of existence in their communities and institutions is not disrupted. As a result, their use of invisibility protects them from humiliation, bullying, transphobia, and general exclusion from social activities that other people enjoy regardless of gender identification.



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Way(s) forward

Universities are a direct reflection of our societies. Transphobia attacks, harassment, and discrimination are on the rise in communities across South Africa, and students are more likely to imitate these behaviours that replicate where they come

from. As a result, it is past time for institutions to develop safe spaces for everyone, especially gender minorities.

Universities should lead the charge for change, but they remain some of the most unaltered and unsafe spaces for people who identify differently. Universities continue to explicitly fight other societal ills such as racism and gender imbalance, but there is still a long way to go in the fight against homophobia and transphobia. Therefore, universities must strengthen their efforts to combat homophobic and transphobic prejudice, discrimination, and violence through policy formation and reformation, advocacy, and awareness campaigns denouncing such treatment.

Additionally, higher education institutions are strongly gendered spaces; they are physically and symbolically divided along gender lines, and remain weaved in the normalised construction of a gender binary. Universities must abandon a binary perspective, adopt and execute gender-inclusive policies, and provide gender-inclusive facilities and housing. They must encourage equality for all, rather than viewing institutions of learning through a gender binary perspective.

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