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Is the world more accepting of transgender people? Yes, but many people still aren't: Ipsos

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While a recent Ipsos survey suggests people around the world are becoming more tolerant of transgender people, one expert warns the “encouraging” results are not inevitable. They take work.

Globally, attitudes towards trans people are largely positive

The survey included responses from 16 countries, including both the United States and Canada. The data revealed the majority of respondents not only believe society is becoming more tolerant towards transgender individuals, but that governments should do more to protect these individuals.

Overall, 70 per cent of respondents believe governments should do more to protect transgender people from discrimination, 69 per cent of respondents believe they should be allowed to undergo surgery so their body matches their identity, and 61 per cent of respondents believe transgender people should be allowed to serve in the military.

“I think the story here is positive, both in general support, both in the notion of protection for transgender individuals and the fact that they should be treated equally to non-transgender individuals,” explained Julia Clark, the Senior Vice President of U.S. Public Affairs at Ipsos.

She goes on to say that while there are some expected outliers, such as Russia, Hungary and Poland, these findings speak to the growing tolerance of people around the world. Furthermore, respondents across the board largely support [transgender people joining the military](#).

Lee Airton, a Queen's University assistant professor of gender and sexuality studies in education and a trans/non-binary advocate, explains that while these results are encouraging, it's important to understand the efforts that went into them.

“It's not an inevitable progression towards tolerance,” they said. “This has been enabled by the last 10 years of work.”

They added that when considering surveys like this one, it's important not to obscure the “sheer amount of labour that has gone into public education advocacy by transgender people by our allies.”

Certain issues still show a divide

While the results represent a positive progression, there were a handful of questions on the survey where the responses stood out. The most notable of these is the division of opinions on whether transgender people should be allowed to use the restroom of the sex they identify with.

Overall, 51 per cent believe they should, 36 per cent believe they shouldn't and 13 per cent were unsure. In the United States however, the divide in public opinion is more noticeable, with 47 per cent in support and 43 per cent against. In Canada, 61 per cent of respondents are in support while 27 per cent of respondents are not.

"We do know from some other work that conservatism, and in some case conservative Christians are often part of the bathroom advocacy movements where they do not want transgender individuals in the bathroom with their gender, and so, I would hazard a guess that some of the religious conservatism drives this," explained Clarke.

In addition, many respondents said they were uncomfortable with exposing children to transgender individuals, with 41 per cent of Americans agreeing with this statement and 26 per cent of Canadians agreeing with this statement.

"About two in five people who worry about exposing children to transgender people in the United States. So I would say that the United States is a little bit of an outlier in English-speaking countries in having this small, but it seems, substantive core of anti-trans sentiment," Clarke continued.

Furthermore, over a third of Americans maintain the belief that transgender people have some form of mental illness, and just under a third of Americans believe that transgender people are committing a sin.

Airton partially attributes these findings to the polarizing nature of politics in the United States. In comparison, 24 per cent of Canadians responded that they believed transgender people were mentally ill and 19 per cent agreed that they are committing a sin.

"The centre in Canada is becoming more understanding that trans people exist, that we are around, that this is just a thing that is part of us and I think the centre in the United States is far less solid, it's a far more polarized country," they said.

On issues such as these, Airton takes it as a sign that those in their line of work have more work to do.

"I think that as the general population just gets to know us a bit more...and realizes that it's not a trend, it's not a crisis, and that children actually have very sophisticated ways of thinking about gender and tolerating gender diversity, I do think that will continue to improve."

How can we better assess people's capacity for acceptance?

The survey defines "transgender" as people who "dress and live as one sex even though they were born another."

Airton concluded that the survey is a great way to get an inclusive look at the changing perspectives on trans issues around the world, but that the next step is to ask questions that assess people's ability to be accepting of gender diversity and freedom as a whole.

"The bathroom choice thing is interesting because the question is whether they should be allowed to use the bathroom of the sex they identify with and, very often this hinges again on the idea of whether people would be able to tell that a person is transgender," they said.

They add that people's answers might change if they were asked whether they'd be comfortable with a transgender person using the bathroom who didn't fit a "hetero-normative idea of what a man or woman looks like."

"That might actually let us know more about the capacity of the public to accept transgender people in the bathroom. This survey is useful because it invites further discussion."

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