We're in the midst of an epidemic of violence against trans people

My experiences as a trans woman back up the shocking statistics in Stonewall's report. It's time to admit the UK has a serious problem

Paris Lees

Of those trans people lucky enough to have a job, one in eight have been physically attacked by a colleague or customer within the past year. Drink after work? Maybe next time, eh. A third of trans people have been discriminated against when visiting a cafe, bar or restaurant. Quiet night in? A quarter of trans people in a relationship in the last year have experienced domestic abuse.

These are just some of the findings published in new research by YouGov and LGBT charity Stonewall, revealing the profound discrimination trans people face in Britain. It's shocking stuff, though not surprising, I suspect, to the majority of trans people who, like me, will have experienced some if not all of these kinds of bullying at some point.

Almost half of us avoid certain streets because we don't feel safe. I know the feeling well. I was called a "fucking tranny" and had rubbish thrown at me on my first trip to London in 2007 by myself, as a newly transitioned, nu rave trans teen.

I was staying with a friend who didn't always "pass" as female – that is, people often perceived her as trans. Alex was a warm-hearted Italian who haggled for buffalo mozzarella in Bethnal Green market while Madonna's Hung Up played on the radio, but she had to run quite the gauntlet to get there. Every day she left the house a group of men would intimidate her and call her a fake woman and an abomination, which is probably why she didn't leave the house every day. She killed herself a few years later.

Nottingham. I'm 16. A gang of lads quite literally snatched the wig off my head and chased me down the street screaming: "Kill the battyman." A few months later a group of grown men turned up and bashed on my front door, shouting: "We know he's in there." I think they just wanted a cup of tea. Pity I was out.

Or there's the time someone asked me if I was a bloke when I dared to buy a pint of milk. Or the men who shouted, "You're a fucking tranny aren't you?" when I was walking home through supposedly liberal Brighton as a university fresher. Or the man who pushed me down the stairs in a nightclub in Nottingham on my 18th birthday because he didn't think "queers" had a right to celebrate in public. I could go on.

It was wrong in the 1960s when people spat on [trans pioneer April Ashley](#) in the street, it was wrong when I was too frightened to walk to school at the start of the millennium, and it is wrong now. Stonewall chief executive Ruth Hunt says the UK is an "unsafe, unwelcoming and frightening place for trans people". She's not kidding. Last year a British trans woman was [granted residency](#) in New Zealand on the grounds that it is "safer" for her there, following years of harassment and discrimination in the UK. Shame on us.

But where, apart from New Zealand, can we go to escape to this hatred? It's everywhere. I won't bombard you with statistics from around the world but I can tell you that a 2014 report [concluded](#) that the average life expectancy of trans women in the Americas is between 30 and 35.

This violence is often justified on the grounds that we're not "real" women, that we're tricksters, sick men who deserve to be beaten and murdered. I wonder if cosy establishment figures who [question whether we're real women](#) have considered how that directly contributes to this culture of violence? The abuse trans people face doesn't occur in a vacuum. The things people read or hear about trans people in the media affect the way they perceive and, ultimately, treat trans people.

Because while we've been being beaten by our partners and colleagues and attacked in the street, the British press has led a relentless campaign against us. Over the past 12 months I've seen trans people blamed for everything from perpetuating gender, abolishing gender altogether, Trump, patriarchy, floods, hurricanes, their own murders, suppressing academic freedom, and destroying truth itself. Forget potential nuclear war, global warming and the many other threats we face: sometimes you'd be forgiven for thinking that trans people are public enemy number one.

But here's the thing: trans people can't be a threat to civilised society, because we don't live in one. Bullied, stigmatised and on the receiving end of death threats, almost half of trans pupils in Britain [have attempted suicide](#). Research tells us that people who are part of stigmatised social groups suffer chronically high levels of stress that affect their mental and physical health. In a civilised society people like me would be able to go about our daily business without feeling constantly under siege. We'd be free to work, to live, to love, without harassment and fear of abuse. We're not.

I'm lucky enough to blend in as a woman these days so I feel relatively safe, or as safe as any other woman in 2018, which, admittedly, isn't necessarily saying a great deal. But even this safety is conditional. It shouldn't be OK for me to walk down the street because people can't, touch wood, tell that I am trans. It should be OK for the same reason it should be for anyone to walk down the street: because I'm human.

Britain needs to take a long hard look at itself and ask why it's allowing some of its most vulnerable citizens to be bullied like this. It's time to admit we've got a serious problem in this country. The Stonewall study isn't just about trans people. It's a portrait of a sick society.

• *Paris Lees is a freelance journalist*

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/22/epidemic-violence-transgender-people-experienced-stonewall