

The Crisis of Violence Against Transgender People Is Not a “Myth”

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I learned a lot about myself while sitting in the first U.S. congressional hearing about the Equality Act this week.

As debate about the act—which would extend federal nondiscrimination laws to LGBTQ people nationwide—[began in earnest](#), I learned that I and other transgender women are [tricksters and frauds intent](#) on supplanting “real” women throughout public life. I learned I’m a [threat to women’s sports](#), a topic many committee members only seem to care about when it can be wielded as a cudgel against transgender people. And perhaps most shockingly, I learned that the well-documented [crisis of violence](#) transgender people face across this country is, in the words of one witness at the hearing, a “myth.”

Just a few days before the hearing and a few miles away from where it took place, [Ashanti Carmon](#) had been shot and killed near the line dividing D.C. and Maryland. Ashanti is the second known Black transgender woman to be murdered in 2019; [Dana Martin](#) was the first, in January in Montgomery, Alabama. Last year, of the 28 known transgender people murdered, 17 of them were Black transgender women.

Even these rates are likely an undercount, reliant as they are upon faulty reporting by police and the media. The federal government regularly fails to collect the basic data that would tell us the true rates of violent death in our communities, but even the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#)’s own hate crime statistics showed anti-transgender violent hate crimes spiking 9 percent from 2016 to 2017. This was part of a larger rise in all hate crimes nationwide following the election of Donald Trump.

The proximity of Ashanti’s death to this hearing is a grim and tragic reminder of the targeted violence and persecution many transgender people still face. Advocates like myself are not basing our beliefs on purely hypothetical risks or absurd theories like those floated by the minority’s witnesses and committee members. We want our society to grow past the prejudice that puts people in real danger today. While transgender people have made much social and political progress in recent years, the bigotry and violence we still face are undeniable—and the very reason we need the Equality Act in the first place.

According to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) from the National Center for Transgender Equality (for which I’m the spokesperson), 1 in 10 transgender people was physically attacked in the past year, and half of all transgender people are survivors of sexual violence.

Family rejection, unemployment, poverty, and a lack of stable housing increase the likelihood anyone will face violence. This is most certainly true of transgender people, and Black and Latina transgender women in particular. The USTS found that transgender people are three times as likely to be unemployed as the rest of the United States, and Black transgender women are four times as likely to be unemployed as the general U.S. population. The survey found 1 in 6 transgender people have been fired from a job because of their gender identity, and 1 in 4 Black respondents experienced the same.

Indeed, one of them stood before the committee on Tuesday. Carter Brown, a Black transgender man, told of the pain his family faced after he was outed as transgender at a prior job before promptly being fired. None of the committee members eager to dispel the reality of anti-transgender bias bothered to speak to him during the hearing or even acknowledge his testimony.

Employment discrimination still keeps many transgender people on the peripheries of the economy, making it harder for many to find stable housing, escape the poverty cycle, and build other supports that lower their chances of experiencing violence. In housing, too, transgender people face discrimination: Our survey found that 1 in 6 transgender people have been evicted or denied a home because of their gender identity, and 1 in 4 Black transgender respondents have been similarly humiliated.

More likely to be homeless and to be forced into criminalized livelihoods—such as sex work—transgender people are left especially vulnerable to all forms of violence. While not often discussed in these terms, the Equality Act’s protections for employment, housing, and other key areas of public life will clearly help mitigate these risks, while eroding the deadly stigma that drives this violence in the first place.

To be sure, the violence faced by women like Ashanti is a function of transphobia and homophobia as much as it is a result of a racist criminal justice system that profiles and targets Black transgender women, leaving them vulnerable to targeted violence and few places to turn if they are in danger. Rejection of transgender people by their families also feeds this harm, acting as a risk multiplier.

No single piece of legislation can hope to correct these shortcomings of our society, and the Equality Act itself leaves much work to do. This includes improvement in public education about the rights and experiences of transgender people, as well as broader solutions to the poverty, homelessness, and other challenges facing trans people and too many other Americans.

But to argue against the basic protections the Act does entail by calling the pervasive violence trans people face a “myth,” and to frame the victims of this violence as villains and bogeymen, is a particularly cruel and dangerous form of recklessness with the truth.

This week’s hearing is one step in the long-running project of ensuring fairness and respect for all. That makes it all the more crucial for it to focus on the facts of what transgender people face in our daily experiences. As transgender people, we are forced to prove our existence and our experience at every step of our lives. If we ever hope to end transphobic violence, we must agree on its existence, its urgency, and the tools needed to stop it.

Transgender individuals must balance being “seen” with being safe

April 4, 2019 12:31 PM CDT By Michelle Zacarias

March 31 marked the 10th anniversary of International Transgender Day of Visibility (TDOV), a holiday that acknowledges the trans and gender non-conforming individuals who experience limited exposure in mainstream society. Celebrating and uplifting trans voices, media outlets highlighted “coming-out” stories of transgender youth.

For trans individuals, however, there is a contentious relationship between being “seen” and valued in society and being safe. Even within LGBTQ communities, trans people often feel compelled to utilize stealth methods as a form of survival, a tactic often referred to as “passing.” Some choose to hide their gender identity in order to safely navigate public spaces.

According to a survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, one in four transgender people have been assaulted because of their gender identity.

The Trump administration has also been relentless in implementing anti-trans policies; it announced the Armed Services will begin discharging transgender military members starting April 12.

Black trans activist, Miss Major spoke on the complicated dynamics of publicly existing as a trans person. “I have some issues over this ‘day of visibility,’” she said over Facebook video. The 78-year-old serves as the executive director of the Transgender Gender Variant Intersex Justice Project which aims to assist transgender persons who are disproportionately incarcerated under the prison-industrial complex. “For most of us, especially black girls, we are as visible as we need to be,” she says, adding, “Our visibility is getting us killed.”

Just one day prior to TDOV, a transgender woman was shot and killed in the Washington D.C. area. The victim was identified as 27-year-old Ashanti Carmon, a Black sex worker from Richmond Highway in Alexandria. This incident and countless others like it serves as a reminder of the high cost of being “visible” in a transphobic society.

Exposure threatens a multitude of risks for trans individuals. They often draw attention from legal authorities due to disproportionate rates of poverty, homelessness, discrimination, and involvement in sex work. According to studies conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, 16 percent – nearly one in six – have been incarcerated at some point in their lives. The rate for transgender women is even higher – 21 percent. Incarceration rate for the general population of the U.S. is 0.7 percent.

The implicit bias of law enforcement drives the high rate of incarceration for transgender people. As agents of the state, police have a track record of enforcing homophobic mandates and legislation. Cops have been known to profile and target trans and gender non-conforming people, a practice that can traced as far back at the Stonewall Riots.

Even in high-profile cases, the mistreatment of trans prisoners is commonplace. Last month, Chelsea Manning, a trans woman activist who was originally imprisoned for leaking military information relating to U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, was incarcerated for the second time. The whistle blower’s first sentence had been commuted by President Barack Obama in 2017 and she was released after serving seven years of a 35-year prison sentence.

However, Manning was recently subpoenaed to appear before a federal grand jury. She was found in contempt and jailed after invoking her constitutional rights in lieu of answering questions posed by government prosecutors. She said she objected to the “secret nature” of the grand jury process and insisted she had already revealed everything she knew. Manning’s legal team asked a federal appeals court to reverse the contempt ruling.

Trans inmates like Manning face harsh circumstances in the prison system despite their mainstream visibility. They are typically kept separated in solitary confinement and often denied access to medical care. Manning is reportedly going on almost a month in segregation – invoking outrage from human rights advocates all over the country. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D.-N.Y.) recently tweeted about Manning, demanding her release and calling for a ban on the practice of extended solitary confinement.

The imprisonment of Chelsea Manning is just one example of a pattern of violence and discrimination in U.S. society against trans people. Transphobia is prevalent even within queer communities, where transgender and nonbinary individuals are often erased from discussions around LGBTQ rights.

While there are certainly benefits to the “awareness” aspects of transgender issues being brought to light, the stakes are high for a transperson “coming out.” The notion that it is a societal privilege to be “seen” by outsiders is only valid for those who are awarded protection with this visibility. It is not a privilege to be “seen” when being seen results in further disenfranchisement.

The recognition of trans communities must also be accompanied with the commitment to create systems that support, protect, and uplift transgender people.

Says Transgender Gender Variant Intersex Justice Project’s Miss Majors: “The people who care about us, who are involved in our lives, and know us, *they* are the people who need to become more visible. They need to acknowledge that we exist, claim and show that they support us.”