

#TransDayofVisibility 2021: Paulie's story

[Blog](#), [Trans](#)

"If we dismantle the gender binary, we will make life a lot easier for everybody."

As most days, Paulie Amanita Calderón-Cifuentes is feeling fabulous and has a busy agenda. These weeks she's working at the Life Beyond HIV project as a consultant; she's hosting events, modelling in photoshoots, facilitating the sexual health group at [TransAktion](#) and dealing with her resident visa in Denmark, where she currently lives.

When she came to the Scandinavian country to do her master's degree in molecular biology, she didn't know this is where she would be spending the next eight years. Originally from Colombia, she lived in Germany and the United States before finding a home in Copenhagen.

"I have worked so hard for the past couple of years to become the person that I am and to have the network and platform that I have," she says. "If I went back to Colombia today, I would not be able to do the activism work that I do right now."

Having said that, Paulie's feeling of belonging in Denmark is tenuous. "Even though I call this place home, I still feel like a foreigner," she admits. "I feel like this is the closest thing to home, but the cultural clashes remain. To some degree I'm a person with no land."

During her time in Copenhagen, she has also undertaken a singular personal journey, and it hasn't always been an easy road. She was the first trans woman in the health faculty at the University of Copenhagen, as she transitioned while pursuing her PhD. "One of my co-workers harassed me because of my breasts," she says. "They thought they were just being funny. They didn't realise that my breasts were actually hurting. It made life at work unbearable".

More than everyday transmisogyny, Paulie has endured far more serious aggressions in her lifetime. She has been raped several times, and once with unforeseen public consequences. "One of those times was here in Copenhagen and the entire story around it in the media, social media and even from politicians focused on trying to make me the criminal. Because I was a trans woman, a person of color and an immigrant, the rhetoric was 'the dude was probably tricked into something which is the reason he reacted like that'."

Paulie's community and family were key to her healing. "The only reason why I managed to survive is because I have an amazing network of friends and family that support me and give me so much love. It's just an immense force; it's an engine."

Her experience has also brought out Paulie's innate empathy. "Because I've felt pain, I have the capacity to identify pain in someone else, even when I don't understand why that pain is there or where it's coming from. I think that if we could all do this, then we might have a chance to change the world into a better place. Beyond that, I think it's absolutely essential right now to dismantle the gender binary. If we do that, we will make life a lot easier for everybody."

Denmark currently ranks sixth on ILGA-Europe's [Rainbow Map](#), our legal index of LGBTI equality in Europe. This year Paulie hopes that trans rights will not regress, but she doesn't foresee any advancements for the most

vulnerable within trans communities.

“We are working really hard for migrants, asylum seekers, people living with HIV, trans youth who are experiencing an increasing amount of homelessness in the country, and also for the recognition of non-binary identities. And of course for black and indigenous and people of colour”.

Paulie is clearly an optimist, and her smile is infectious, even over a Zoom call, but when we begin talking about the rise in anti-trans discourse online and in the media, that smile darkens.

“I take it very personally and I get furious, especially in a country like Denmark where the transphobia and cisnormativity are so tangled with racism, xenophobia, sexism and misogyny,” she says. “I just can’t help it.”

However, she definitely does not feel helpless. “I’m a very privileged trans woman. I come from an academic background that allows me some level of empowerment. I come from certain socio-economical class, I pass, but the most important privilege is the support of my family. Even though I’m a trans woman, an immigrant, a person of colour, I’m living with HIV and have been victim of sexual violence several times, I feel like all my privileges give me the power that I need. And with power comes responsibility, just like Spider-Man!”

Paulie’s message for Trans Day of Visibility mixes this sense of power with the compassion for others that has grown during her life journey. “I really hope that we all do more intersectional work, bringing empathy and kindness to the fore, so that the community becomes stronger and more powerful every day. I want to tell trans people in Denmark that they have a home, and a friend here who is always willing to help.

“Trans Day of Visibility is necessary because we have been pushed away for so long. It’s important to remember that we’re not invisible and that we are entitled to feel angry and sad. At the same time all the oppressions that we have experienced through our lives give us a superpower that privilege doesn’t give, and that is empathy and kindness, because we know how bad it gets.

“If we manage to go through the anger and the sadness and then harvest empathy and kindness, we will be an unstoppable force that will transform the world into a rising queer phoenix, spreading feathers of joy, hope and wellbeing for everybody. Not that we owe them anything, but we have the tools to lead the next revolution. So queer up, people, queer up!”