

#TransDayofVisibility 2021: Shash's story

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

"There is so much strength found in solidarity, now more than ever."

When Shash Appan was just 18 and living in the UK city of Birmingham, she came out to her family as trans. It didn't go well. "It was a cataclysm of things going wrong," she remembers. "As with a lot of queer kids at that age, my schooling was affected. All my plans to escape went up in the air because I was in such difficulty that couldn't get the grades I needed to move on."

Eventually, Shash was driven to attempting suicide. She was then sectioned by her parents. "My memory of this time is very hazy," she says. "By the time I started coming back to myself, I was the duty-free lounge at Manchester Airport. My parents were sending me to India to stay with my grandparents."

"I wasn't against it at the time. I like my grandparents, and I was depressed and sad, so I thought it would be nice to see them for two weeks. Those two weeks turned out to be two years of enforced social isolation, with no access to Internet or other communication. I was sent to a psychiatrist, essentially for conversion therapy."

But Shash is nothing, if not resilient, and her brush with mortality and subsequent isolation made her want to live life on her own terms. "I kind of ground my grandparents down over the two years, and eventually they let me go back to the UK. They sent me with just the clothes I had on my back, and no phone or money. I think they wanted to make it as difficult as possible, so I would come back to India. I was allowed one phone call before I left, and I used it to get people I knew back in the UK to pick me up at the airport. I started living as my authentic self as soon as I could."

A new life

Shash's re-entry to living in Britain eventually led to a new life in the Welsh city of Cardiff. "I was homeless for a while and struggling to live, and then I got offered to study computer science at Cardiff Met University. I packed up what little I had, got on a bus, and I've been here since."

As with many people who devote their lives to activism, Shash stumbled into it. "I did a work experience program and during that time was invited to be on a panel to talk about being trans," she explains. "From then on, I started speaking at things and getting more involved in grassroots activism."

"I became an activist because of my ability to speak. It felt like a duty for me to use that ability. I didn't choose to become an activist because it was lucrative, which it absolutely is not, nor for the notoriety. If anything, it's brought me nothing but struggle. I've met some great people, don't get me wrong, but sometimes it feels like things aren't changing, no matter how much you do. I know so many people who take no time off, and they just burn out."

Shash is a co-founder of Trans Aid Cymru, a mutual support service for trans people in Wales. "We initially came about after there was a leak in the *Sunday Times* saying that the UK gender recognition act reform (GRA) was going to be shelved. We were tired of the system failing us when we were trying to play by its rules. We're trying to get people in government to listen to us, lobbying them and doing all things you are supposed to do. The only times

when we would ever get sit at the table was if we threw the more marginalised among this under the bus, like non-binary people. So, it became a thing of, we need to support ourselves and we have skills within our community to do so. We decided we should start a mutual aid to provide support services for trans people.”

Trans Aid Cymru is a small organisation, with a massive responsibility. Many of the situations Shash and the other organisation members are called in to help with are urgent, and their capacity is limited. “At first, we were surprised that an organisation like ours didn’t exist already, because we kept finding we were so needed, but is also becoming apparent to us that it’s almost too much. We’ve had to be careful to not push ourselves too hard.”

It feels lonely

The atmosphere around trans issues in the UK is charged, to say the least, with vehement anti-trans rhetoric on social media every day, and regularly in the mainstream media, much of it coming from trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), who argue that trans women are not women, and are taking over ‘real’ women’s spaces. If you are trans, it is not an easy atmosphere to live in.

“One of my biggest worries is getting attacked or targeted just for being me, and not because I’m an activist or anything like that,” Shash says. “I’m lucky to say that I’m quite cis passing now, which is to some degree a privilege in navigating the world. Still, even before the pandemic, I was struggling to leave the house and that’s largely due to the transphobic atmosphere. There’s not a weekend without one transphobic article in the mainstream press. I’m never free from something transphobic occurring. On top of that, because I’m brown as well, I’m also facing a degree of racism within our queer community, which is unfortunately mostly white. I live with a measure of ostracisation and microaggression, and it feels lonely a lot of the time.

“With anti-trans propaganda constantly out there, it’s hard to feel like you’re wanted by society. In fact, it feels like society is very actively trying to push me away. I’d like to say it’s not succeeding, but I know so many, myself included, who have shied away from like doing things in public. I used to enjoy going swimming so much, but to do that now is just too nerve-wracking.”

Luckily, Shash has a loving partner to support her, but this comes with an ironic twist. “She is a lesbian,” Shash explains. “With GRA reform being delayed and my birth certificate remaining unchanged, if we got married right now, I would be put down as her husband. So, while TERFs are saying that trans women are erasing lesbians, if we got married now, it would actually erase my partner’s lesbian identity.

History repeating itself

The attacks on trans people in many European countries bring up other times in history, when similar limiting of expression has taken place. “We’ve seen it time and time again,” says Shash, “where laws are introduced and there is propaganda and a public atmosphere to the point where certain groups are villainised. It’s always the same kind of rhetoric. It’s not even like ‘we wouldn’t want them raising our kids’ or arguments like that. It’s much more nebulous. It’s more like ‘they do not have a place in our society’.

“In the 1980s it was gay people, and in the 20s and 30s it was Jewish people. It happens in other countries with different groups, and it’s just tiring that society has not learned from the fact that we are just recycling the same rhetoric, blaming marginalised groups because of things going wrong in general.

“It’s unfortunate that people like me are facing the brunt of it here, because what am I going to do? I’m just one person. It’s frustrating that my options are limited, regardless of my choice. There are barriers in place that make me have to think ten times harder whenever I have to approach something officially, or if I want to do something.

“It shouldn’t be a struggle to survive day-to-day. One of the things that I try to focus in my activism is trying to help

people move past survival, until they thrive and enjoy their lives, because that is what people should be able to do. If I can even help like at least one or two people, that's enough for me. I don't particularly care for seeing bigots being shamed or anything like it. At the end of the day, I would much rather see a trans person living their best life, because that brings me so much joy."

For Trans Day of Visibility 2021, Shash has a clear message for trans and non-binary people everywhere. "There's no point waiting for cis validation," she asserts. "Be visible on your own terms, be proud of yourself and your community. Rely on your community. There is so much strength found in solidarity, now more than ever. Try to move past survival, so you can thrive."