IDAHOBIT 2026:
South Africa's Constitutional Legacy and the Global Struggle for LGBTQI+ Rights

As the world marks the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOBIT) in 2026, South Africa remains an important example of how constitutional protections can help shape a more inclusive society. Thirty years after the adoption of its Constitution, the country continues to stand out globally for its commitment to equality, dignity, and freedom, including the protection of LGBTQI+ rights.

South Africa was the first country in the world to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in its Constitution. At the time, this was a groundbreaking step that laid the foundation for a series of landmark Constitutional Court rulings dismantling discriminatory laws. A decade later, the Civil Union Act of 2006 legalized same-sex marriage, making South Africa the first country in Africa to do so.

These milestones demonstrate the power of constitutional law when rooted in universal human rights principles. They also reinforce a broader truth: human rights are universal, indivisible, and belong to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics.

At the same time, South Africa's experience also highlights the gap that can exist between legal protection and lived reality. Despite progressive laws, many LGBTQI+ people still face discrimination, violence, and exclusion. This reflects a wider global challenge. Legal reform alone is not enough. Lasting change also depends on education, inclusive policies, and continued advocacy by governments, civil society, and communities themselves.

International solidarity therefore remains essential. Belgium continues to maintain a strong and principled commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of LGBTQI+ persons at both European and international levels. At a time when setbacks in gender equality and growing anti-gender movements are threatening hard-won progress in many parts of the world, speaking out in defence of human rights has become more important than ever.

Belgium firmly condemns all forms of violence, stigmatization, and criminalization directed at LGBTQI+ persons and recalls that states have an obligation to protect all individuals from discrimination and violations of their dignity. Promoting LGBTQI+ rights is not only about protecting individuals; it also contributes to building more inclusive, resilient, and just societies.

This message resonates strongly in South Africa, where civil society organisations and human rights defenders have played a central role in advancing equality. Their work serves as a reminder that rights cannot be taken for granted. They must be actively defended and strengthened over time.

Belgium also recognises that support must be shaped by local realities. Through cooperation with civil society partners and human rights defenders, Belgium supports approaches that are adapted to national contexts, including discreet engagement where visibility may place individuals at risk.

An intersectional approach is equally important. Experiences of discrimination are often layered and interconnected. A Black transgender woman, for example, may face discrimination linked not only to gender identity, but also to race, social inequality, or economic vulnerability. Effective policies must acknowledge and respond to these overlapping realities.

South Africa’s own history and social fabric illustrate this clearly. Addressing inequality in a meaningful way requires recognising how race, gender, poverty, and identity intersect in everyday life.

As IDAHOBIT 2026 is observed around the world, South Africa’s constitutional journey remains both an inspiration and a reminder. Progress is possible when equality is protected in law and supported through collective action. But progress is never guaranteed. The rights secured today must continue to be defended tomorrow so that the promise of equality becomes a lived reality for all.