# The Impact of Gender Identity Laws on Transgender Mental Health: A Systematic Literature Review

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**Abstract:**
**Background:**The global transformation of gender identity laws has generated profound implications for transgender populations, particularly in relation to mental health outcomes. While existing scholarship frequently highlights stigma, discrimination, and minority stress, the role of legal frameworks as structural determinants of psychological well-being remains insufficiently synthesised. This study aims to systematically examine the impact of gender identity laws on transgender mental health within a global research landscape.
**Method:** A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with bibliometric analysis was conducted using the Scopus database (12 February 2026). Following PRISMA procedures, an initial 5,796 records were progressively refined using increasingly specific keywords. After screening for relevance, document type, and language, 16 empirical articles were included for qualitative synthesis.
**Results:** Findings reveal a growing yet geographically concentrated body of research, dominated by the United States and Western institutions. Evidence consistently indicates that restrictive or ambiguous legal environments exacerbate depression, anxiety, and suicidality, whereas affirming policies and a sense of community belonging act as protective factors. Transgender mental health is influenced by individual psychological factors, social pressures, structural determinants, access to affirming health services, and legal frameworks, with risks and protective factors interacting across personal, social, and systemic levels.
**Conclusion:** Gender identity laws function as structural determinants of transgender mental health. Future interdisciplinary research integrating legal analysis and public health perspectives is urgently needed, particularly in underrepresented regions.
**Keywords:** Gender Identity, Laws, Mental Health

## INTRODUCTION

Mental health plays a central role in shaping individual quality of life and overall social functioning [1,2]. Adequate psychological wellbeing supports emotional regulation, cognitive clarity, and productive engagement in social and occupational domains, whereas mental disorders reduce functional capacity and increase exposure to social, economic, and physical health risks [3]. Within a sustainable development framework, mental health strengthens human capital, economic productivity, and social cohesion, while fostering resilience and adaptive capacity [1]. In recent decades, public health scholarship has increasingly examined the mental health of gender minorities, including transgender individuals, defined as those whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth [4,5]. Across diverse contexts, transgender populations often face stigma, discrimination, and

restrictive legal environments that shape their lived experiences [6,7]. Empirical evidence consistently reports elevated rates of depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and suicide risk compared with the general population [8]. However, the structural determinants underlying these disparities remain insufficiently integrated within existing analyses, indicating the need for more comprehensive approaches [9].

Most previous studies have concentrated on individual psychological dimensions and social determinants such as discrimination, family rejection, gender based violence, and economic marginalisation [10].Widely used theoretical frameworks, including minority stress theory, emphasise that chronic social pressure arising from stigma and discrimination contributes to sustained psychological burden [11,12]. This perspective has been effective in explaining how discriminatory experiences may become internalised and subsequently influence mental wellbeing [13]. However, broader structural dimensions, particularly the role of legal systems and state policy, have not always been examined comprehensively in relation to transgender mental health.

Law functions not only as a body of norms regulating social behaviour but also as an instrument that shapes social legitimacy and access to resources [14]. In the transgender context, legal regulation may include recognition of gender identity in official documentation, anti discrimination protections, access to gender affirming health services, and policies that are restrictive or criminalising [15]. An affirming legal environment has the potential to foster a sense of security, expand access to health care services, and reduce exposure to institutional stigma [16]. Conversely, policies that impose restrictions or fail to provide recognition may intensify marginalisation, limit access to employment and education, and heighten psychological strain resulting from uncertainty in legal status [17]. Consequently, examining the relationship between legal regulation and psychological wellbeing has become increasingly important within contemporary public health scholarship [18].

Against this background, the present study contributes by integrating legal analysis and mental health within a unified conceptual framework [19]. By positioning law as a structural determinant, this work broadens public health perspectives that have traditionally concentrated more heavily on social and individual factors [20]. Furthermore, identifying geographical and thematic gaps is expected to encourage the development of more representative cross cultural research [21]. Ultimately, transgender mental health should not be viewed solely as a clinical concern but also as a matter of social justice and policy governance [22]. In a rapidly evolving global context, evidence based research provides an essential foundation for formulating policies that respect human dignity and safeguard the psychological wellbeing of all citizens without discrimination [23]. Therefore, this systematic review is expected not only to enrich the academic literature but also to support interdisciplinary dialogue and more inclusive policy reform in the future.

This study addresses three principal questions within a Systematic Literature Review framework. The first (RQ1) evaluates the continuing relevance and urgency of scholarship on the impact of legal regulation and public policy on transgender mental health amid evolving global legal dynamics. The second (RQ2) analyses the geographical distribution, methodological patterns, and recent publication trends of research examining the relationship between legal systems, including criminalisation, gender identity recognition, and anti discrimination protections, and mental health outcomes. The third (RQ3) assesses the theoretical and practical implications of this literature for shaping future research agendas, informing public policy, and strengthening evidence based mental health interventions.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Method

This study applied a Systematic Literature Review combined with bibliometric analysis to synthesise evidence on the impact of gender identity laws on transgender mental health [24]. The selection process followed PRISMA procedures, including identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages [25]. Eligible studies were English language primary research articles in final publication form that explicitly examined the relationship between legal regulation of gender identity and mental health outcomes [26]. Reviews, book chapters, and other non empirical documents were excluded to ensure methodological consistency and empirical robustness [24]. The complete selection procedure is presented in **Figure 1.**

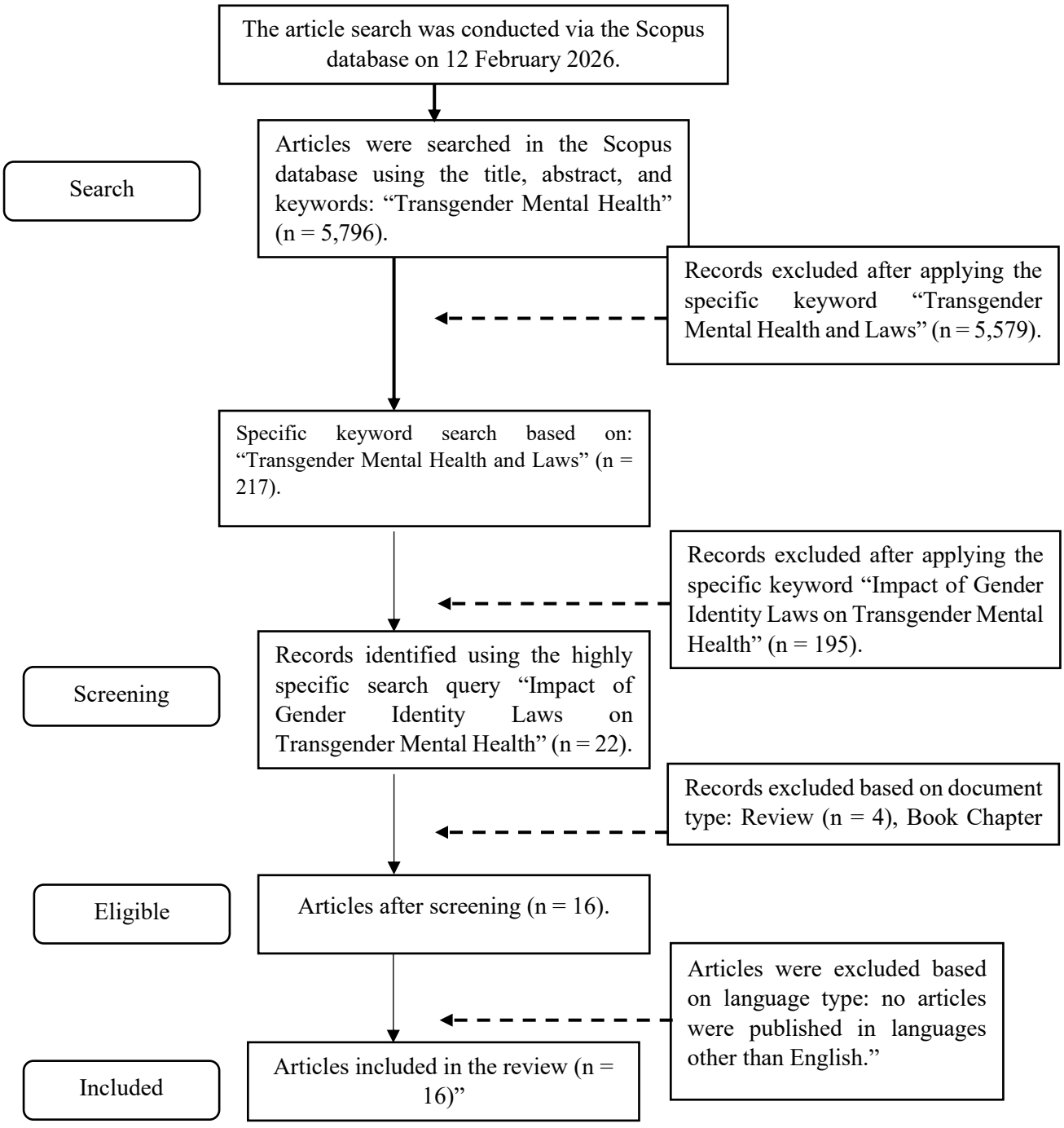



**Figure 1.** PRISMA Diagram of the Study

**Data Sources**

Data were retrieved from the Scopus database due to its broad international coverage and indexing quality. The search was conducted on 12 February 2026 using title, abstract, and keyword fields. A stepwise strategy was employed, beginning with "Transgender Mental Health", refined to "Transgender Mental Health and Laws", and narrowed to "Impact of Gender Identity Laws on Transgender Mental Health" to capture studies addressing legal structures as determinants of mental health.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

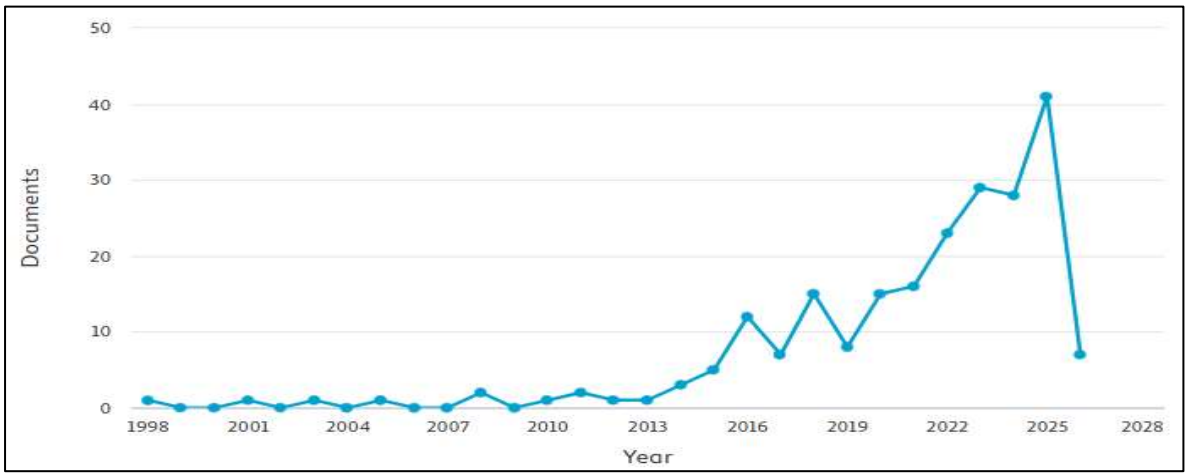
Analysis combined qualitative synthesis and bibliometric mapping. The qualitative approach identified thematic patterns and forms of legal impact on mental health, while bibliometric analysis examined publication trends and research development based on document characteristics and output volume.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This section presents the results of the literature synthesis derived from the systematic processes of selection, screening, and analysis in accordance with the established research protocol. The identified findings are not only described but also examined critically to reveal prevailing patterns, emerging trends, and persisting research gaps.

***The first research question (RQ1)*** *: The first research question examines whether studies on the impact of legal regulation and public policy on transgender mental health remain significant and urgent amid evolving global legal dynamics.*

The documents by year graph for the keyword "Transgender Mental Health and Laws" presented in **Figure 2** demonstrates a highly visible and meaningful pattern in scientific production. During the early period, from the late 1990s to approximately 2013, the number of publications remained very limited and sporadic, indicating that the relationship between transgender mental health and legal regulation had not yet become a mainstream focus in academic research. However, from around 2015 onwards, a consistent acceleration is evident, with a particularly sharp increase after 2018. The peak level of productivity appears in 2025 with approximately 41 documents, reflecting intensified global attention to legal implications, structural stigma, and their effects on the psychological wellbeing of transgender populations. The decline observed in 2026, with roughly seven documents, is likely temporary because the current year has not yet been fully indexed. Substantively, this trend confirms that the field is undergoing a phase of expansion and theoretical consolidation, driven by growing policy awareness, human rights advocacy, and interdisciplinary engagement across public health, law, and gender studies.

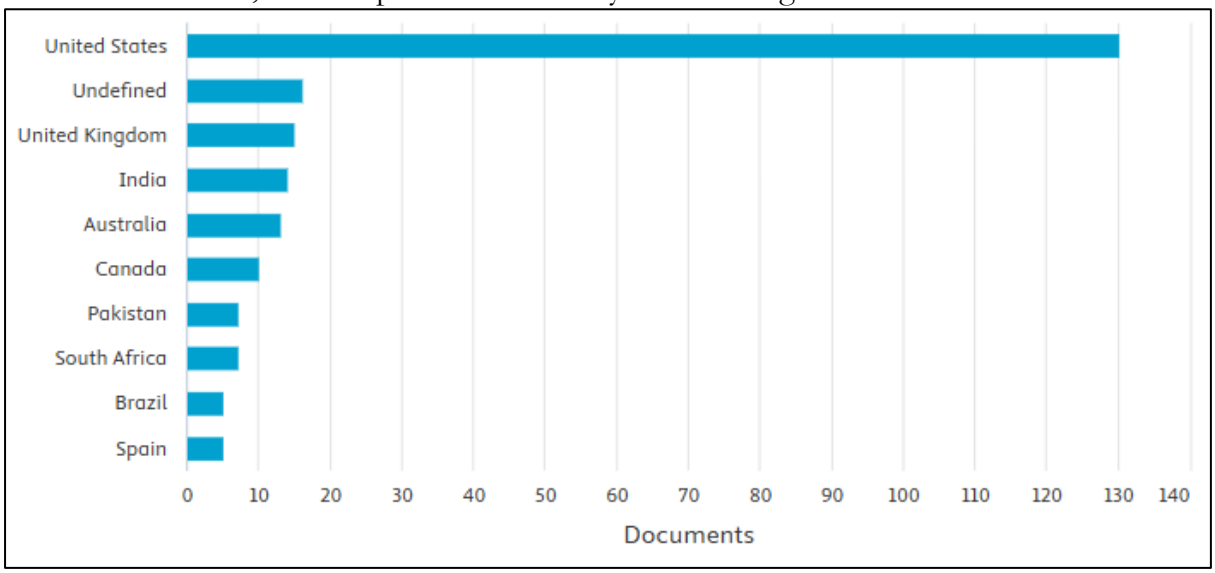



**Source:** Scopus Data Output

**Figure 2**. Annual Publication Trend

***The second research question (RQ2)**: how studies on the relationship between legal systems, including criminalisation, gender identity recognition, and anti discrimination protections, and transgender mental health are distributed across regions, methodologies, and recent publication trends.*

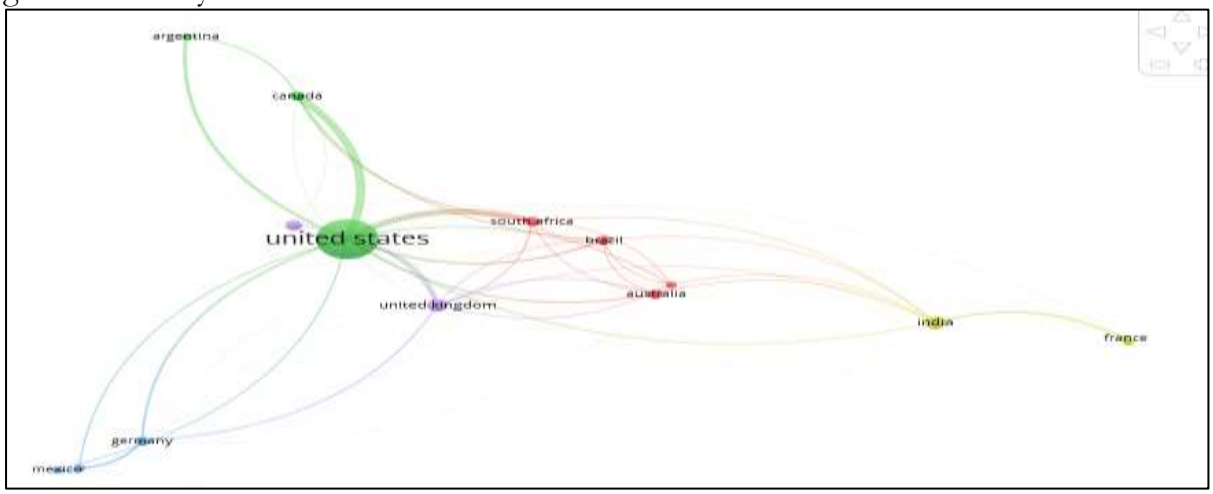
The documents by country or territory graph for the keyword "Transgender Mental Health and Laws" in **Figure 3** reveals a highly uneven geographical concentration of scientific output. The United States dominates markedly with approximately 130 publications, far exceeding other countries, which indicates strong research capacity, robust academic infrastructure, and significant policy urgency concerning transgender mental health within that context. A second tier of countries, including the United Kingdom at approximately 15 publications, India at about 14, Australia at around 13, and Canada at roughly 10, demonstrates moderate contributions yet still remains substantially behind the leading country. Meanwhile, countries such as Pakistan, South Africa, Brazil, and Spain show relatively low levels of output, possibly reflecting limitations in research prioritisation, available resources, or sociopolitical sensitivity surrounding the issue.




**Source:** Scopus Data Output

**Figure 3.** Top Ten Countries by Number of Publications on Transgender Mental Health

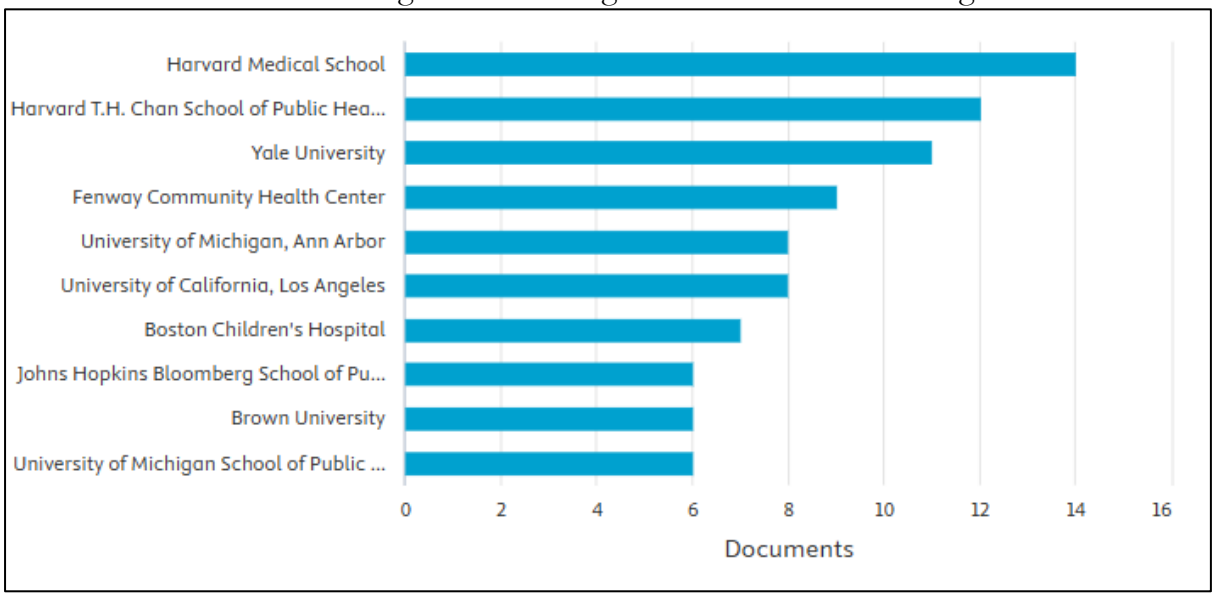
The data presented in **Figure 4**, derived from the Scopus database and analysed through bibliometric methods, map cross national collaboration on the legal impact of transgender mental health by identifying key actors, collaboration intensity, and structural patterns of global scholarly networks.




**Source:** VOSviewer Software Output

**Figure 4.** Network Country Visualization

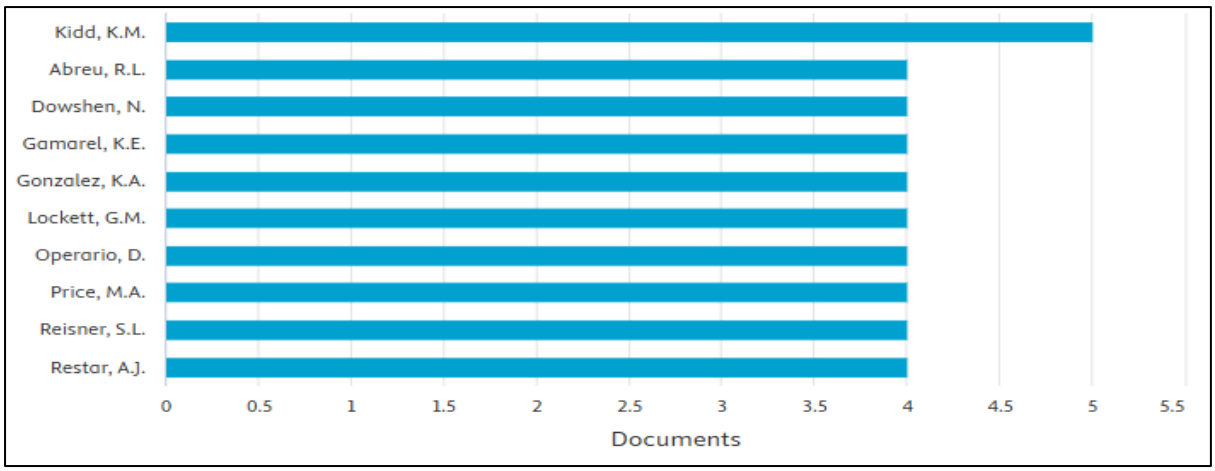
The clear dominance of the United States reflects sustained federal and state level legal developments, reinforced by substantial research funding, specialised centres in gender studies and public health, interdisciplinary integration across law, psychology, and public health, and strong publication traditions in Scopus indexed journals that frame transgender issues within health equity and human rights agendas. Consistent with this pattern, a Scopus search for the period 1998 to 2026 using the keyword "Transgender Mental Health and Laws" indicates that the field has become multidisciplinary, with leading institutional contributions concentrated in United States organisations, including Harvard Medical School, Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, Yale University, Fenway Community Health Center, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, University of California at Los Angeles, Boston Children's Hospital, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and Brown University, as shown in **Figure 5**. This concentration situates the discourse primarily within clinical medicine, public health, and policy research, conceptualising legal regulation as a structural determinant with measurable psychological consequences, while the absence of prominent Asian institutions reveals a geographical imbalance and underscores the need to strengthen research grounded in Asian socio legal contexts.




**Source:** Scopus Data Output

**Figure 5.** Top Ten Institutional Affiliations by Number of Publications

Based on the documents by author graph for the topic "Transgender Mental Health and Laws" in **Figure 6**, the productivity of the ten most prolific authors demonstrates a relatively even distribution. The most productive author is Kidd, K. M., with a total of five publications. The remaining nine authors each have four publications, namely Abreu, R. L.; Dowshen, N.; Gamarel, K. E.; Gonzalez, K. A.; Lockett, G. M.; Operario, D.; Price, M. A.; Reisner, S. L.; and Restar, A. J. This pattern indicates the absence of a pronounced productivity gap among the principal contributors. From a bibliometric perspective, this configuration suggests that the field remains relatively distributed, with intellectual leadership that is collective rather than highly concentrated, thereby creating space for the emergence of new academic actors in advancing research on the intersection between transgender mental health and legal frameworks.

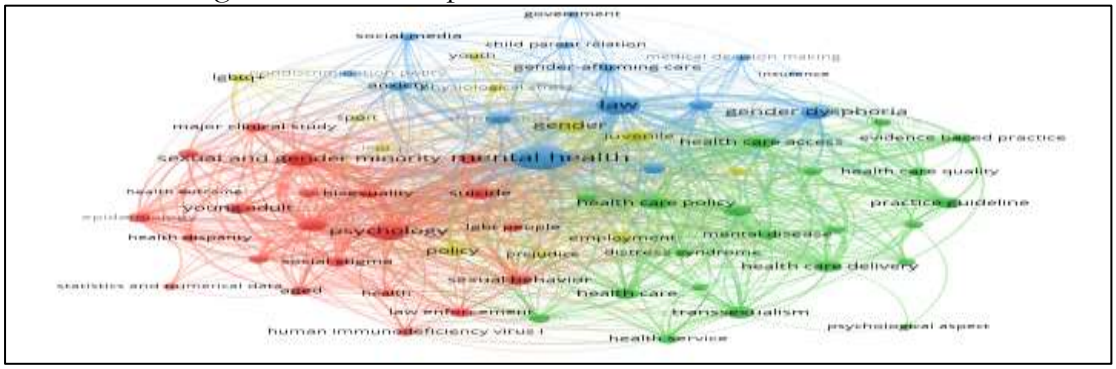



**Source:** Scopus Data Output
**Figure 6.** Top Ten Authors of Published Articles

This pattern indicates that the field is inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary. Authors with higher publication outputs tend to sustain research agendas centred on health policy, social determinants, and transgender mental health, while other contributors with fewer publications continue to enrich theoretical and empirical discussions. The relatively balanced distribution of publications reflects a scholarly landscape shaped by cooperation and cross disciplinary engagement. Moreover, the absence of dominance by a small number of authors suggests that the field remains in a developmental and consolidative phase. This situation allows wider academic participation and supports diversification in methodological designs and research settings. Thus, examining leading authors reveals not only individual productivity but also the dynamic and evolving nature of this research domain.

***Research Question Three (RQ3):*** *What theoretical and practical implications emerge from the existing body of studies for the advancement of future research, the formulation of public policy, and the development of more comprehensive and evidence based mental health interventions?*

The conceptual linkage visualisation presented in **Figure 7** illustrates a co occurrence map of keywords indexed in the Scopus database concerning research on the legal impact on transgender mental health. The size of each node represents the frequency with which a term appears, while the connecting lines indicate the degree of association between concepts within the same publications. The terms *mental health* and *gender* occupy the most central positions, as reflected by their larger node sizes and extensive connectivity. This pattern demonstrates that mental health and gender identity function as the principal axes of scholarly discourse, linking multiple dimensions such as law, health policy, service access, social stigma, and clinical practice.




**Source:** VOSviewer Software Output
**Figure 7.** Network Visualisation of Keyword Co Occurrence in Mental Health Research

**Table 2.** Ten Articles Related to Transgender Mental Health and Law Based on Scopus Data

| No | Article Title | Discussion |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | *Structural stigma, gender-affirming interventions, and identity concealment as determinants of depression and life satisfaction among trans adults in 28 European countries* [37] | This study examines the relationships among structural stigma, gender affirming interventions, and identity concealment in relation to depression and life satisfaction among 18,845 transgender adults across twenty eight European countries. The findings indicate that structural stigma restricts access to gender affirming interventions, whereas a stronger sense of identity belonging and residence within lower stigma contexts are associated with improved psychological wellbeing. |
| 2 | *A Narrative Synthesis Review of Legislation Banning Gender-Affirming Care* [38] | This narrative review examines the expansion of legislation in the United States that prohibits gender affirming care for transgender adolescents. The analysis demonstrates that such policies are associated with adverse consequences for adolescent mental health, increased strain on healthcare professionals, and disruption to the implementation of evidence based medical practice. |
| 3 | *Legislative Debate-Attributed Suicidality Among LGBTQ+ Adults: The Buffering Effect of Community Belongingness* [39] | A quantitative study involving 817 LGBTQ+ respondents in Kentucky indicates that legislative debates are associated with an increase in suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. The findings further demonstrate that a sense of community belonging functions as a significant protective factor against suicidality. |
| 4 | *Law, health and suicide: Impacts of laws and judicial decisions on the health of LGBT youth* [40] | This qualitative research analyses the influence of legal frameworks and court decisions on the mental health of LGBT adolescents. The findings indicate that the protection of rights is associated with reduced social stigma and a lower risk of suicide, whereas the restriction of rights is linked to heightened psychological vulnerability. |
| 5 | *Characterizing state-level structural cisheterosexism trajectories using sequence and cluster analysis, 1996–2016, 50 US states and Washington, DC, and associations with health status and health care outcomes* [41] | This quantitative study examines patterns of discriminatory and protective policies affecting LGBTQ+ populations across the fifty states of the United States between 1996 and 2016. Sequence and cluster analysis were employed to identify policy trajectories over time. The findings indicate that states characterised by consistently discriminatory legal frameworks exhibit poorer health outcomes and more limited access to health services among LGBTQ+ populations. |

| No | Article Title | Discussion |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | *"I Don't Even Want to Come Out": the Suppressed Voices of Our Future and Opening the Lid on Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Workplace Discrimination in Europe: a Qualitative Study* [42] | A qualitative investigation involving fifty five sexual and gender minority youths across several European countries found that social and workplace discrimination often compelled individuals to conceal their identities. Transgender and non binary participants were identified as particularly vulnerable to discriminatory treatment. The study recommends the implementation of inclusive workplace policies alongside targeted training initiatives. |
| 7 | *Gender Identity: The Human Right of Depathologization* [43] | A normative article grounded in a human rights perspective examines the pathologisation of transgender identity as a form of rights violation. The analysis underscores the importance of depathologisation, formal legal recognition, and the provision of health services free from medical stigma. |
| 8 | *Making the Invisible Visible: A Systematic Review of Sexual Minority Women's Health in Southern Africa* [44] | A systematic review identifies health disparities affecting sexual minority women in Southern Africa. Principal findings include elevated exposure to gender based violence, substance use, heightened risk of HIV infection, and significant mental health concerns. The review highlights substantial research gaps and calls for more inclusive health policy frameworks. |
| 9 | *The Barriers of Florida's Anti-LGBTQ+ Laws in Healthcare and Its Impact on the Mental Health of Gender and Sexual Minorities* [45] | This article examines the effects of anti LGBTQ plus policies in Florida on access to health services and on the mental health of gender and sexual minority populations. The findings indicate that restrictive legal measures are associated with heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, alongside growing distrust of the health system, thereby contributing to a deterioration in psychological wellbeing. |
| 10 | *Isolation, Stressors, and Resiliency: Examining the Experiences of a Transgender Woman in Engineering* [46] | This qualitative case study explores the lived experiences of a transgender woman working within the field of engineering. The analysis highlights themes of social isolation, pressures arising from academic and professional environments, and experiences of gender based discrimination. It also identifies key resilience factors that enable the individual to persist and |

| No | Article Title | Discussion |
|---|---|---|
| | | adapt within settings that are insufficiently inclusive. |

The screening results of the ten relevant articles presented in **Table 2** demonstrate a consistent pattern indicating that legal regulation and public policy exert both direct and indirect implications for the mental health of transgender individuals and gender minority populations. From a methodological perspective, these studies reflect a diverse range of approaches, encompassing large scale cross national quantitative analyses, state level policy based longitudinal investigations, exploratory qualitative inquiries, and normative reviews grounded in human rights principles. Despite variations in research design, a clear and convergent theme emerges showing that structural stigma, restrictive legislation concerning gender affirming care, and discriminatory policy environments are associated with heightened levels of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and reduced life satisfaction.
Conversely, legal recognition, rights protection, and access to affirming services function as protective factors that strengthen psychological wellbeing [27]. Several studies further indicate that the legislative debate itself, irrespective of policy outcomes, may generate psychological strain through mechanisms of symbolic threat and uncertainty surrounding social status [28]. Collectively, the evidence summarised in this table demonstrates that law operates not merely as a normative framework but also as a social determinant of health that produces systemic psychological consequences.
The conceptual diagram presented in **Figure 8** was developed through a systematic review of Scopus indexed scholarly publications concerning transgender mental health. The mapping process involved the identification of dominant themes, recurrent variables, and patterns of conceptual association observed across both empirical and theoretical studies. The synthesis indicates that transgender mental health cannot be adequately understood in isolation. Rather, it should be conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of psychological, social, structural, and legal factors.

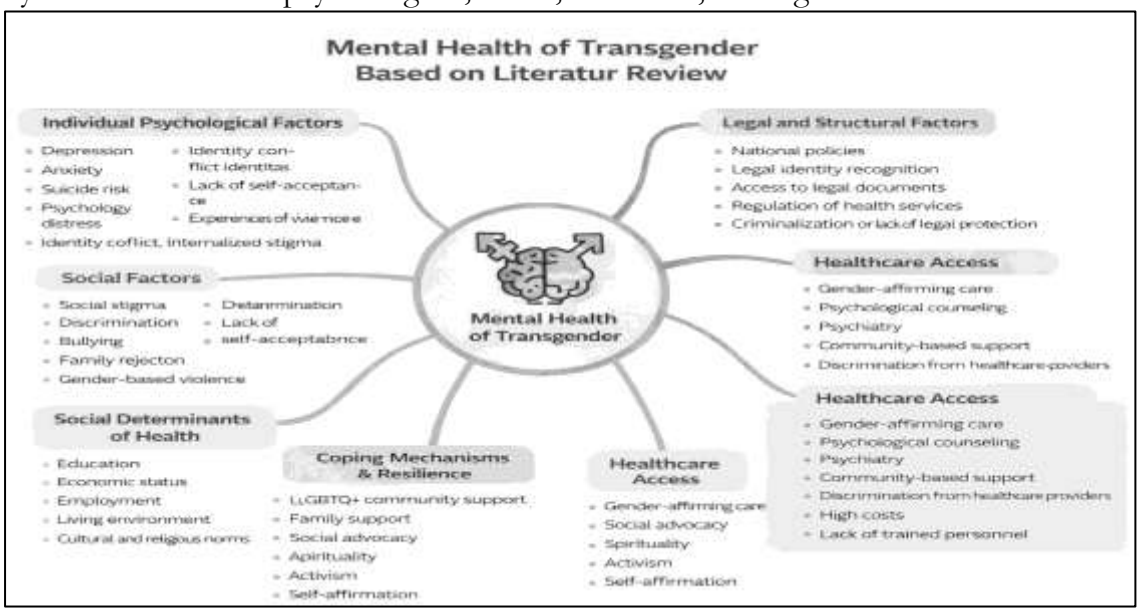



**Figure 8.** Conceptual Framework of Transgender Mental Health Based on the Literature Review

**Figure 8** conceptualises transgender mental health as a multidimensional construct shaped by individual psychological factors, social influences, social determinants of health, coping and resilience mechanisms, access to health services, and legal and structural frameworks. At the individual level, mental health vulnerability is manifested through depression,

anxiety, suicide risk, identity conflict, and the internalisation of stigma [29]. These conditions are often intensified by limited self acceptance and by experiences of violence encountered by transgender individuals [30]. From a psychosocial perspective, these pressures do not operate in isolation but interact with social stigma, discrimination, bullying, family rejection, and gender based violence, all of which compound psychological distress.

## DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This discussion critically interprets the findings on the relationship between gender identity regulation and transgender mental health, positioning law as a social determinant that operates through administrative, symbolic, and social mechanisms. The analysis examines how legal structures interact with psychological conditions at an institutional level. The sharp increase in publications after 2015, peaking in 2025, indicates growing scholarly consolidation in response to evolving global legal policies. This trend reflects a broader shift from individual centred explanations toward structural analysis [31], alongside the recognition of legal frameworks as social determinants of health with measurable psychological implications. However, rising publication volume should not be equated with consensus. Methodological diversity, varying mental health indicators, and heterogeneous legal contexts suggest ongoing theoretical maturation. While the literature increasingly associates legal environments with psychological outcomes, stronger causal claims require more rigorous longitudinal evidence.

Second, the geographic distribution of publications demonstrates a clear imbalance in knowledge production. The dominance of the United States, far exceeding other countries, indicates that global understanding of transgender mental health within legal contexts is largely shaped by Global North experiences. Although the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and India have contributed, their output remains comparatively modest, reflecting a field that is not yet globally representative. This disparity carries important implications. Given the substantial differences in legal systems, social norms, and healthcare structures across jurisdictions [32], findings derived from Western settings cannot be readily generalised to other regions, particularly Asia. The limited presence of Asian institutional affiliations highlights a significant regional gap. From a systematic review standpoint, this absence represents not only insufficient data but also a theoretically meaningful limitation with consequences for global interpretation [33].

From a public policy perspective, law affects transgender mental health through interconnected pathways involving access to healthcare, employment, and education, symbolic recognition of identity, and administrative validation in official documents. These mechanisms help explain variations in psychological outcomes, although most studies focus on direct associations without testing comprehensive mediational models. Overall, legal frameworks operate as structural determinants shaping the psychosocial environment of transgender individuals [34,35]. Ambiguous regulations, barriers to identity document changes, and exposure to administrative or social sanctions may restrict service access, intensify minority stress, and increase anxiety, depression, and psychological distress [36]. However, law should be understood as a structural condition that interacts with lived experience rather than as a singular causal factor.

A central finding of this synthesis is the limited scholarship addressing transgender mental health within legal contexts in Asian countries. This deficit is significant, particularly as several jurisdictions maintain restrictive regulatory frameworks, including administrative constraints and moral regulations on gender expression. The scarcity of empirical evidence from these settings risks reinforcing a globally imbalanced perspective. Given that restrictive contexts require the most urgent investigation, their underrepresentation

constitutes a critical blind spot at the intersection of public health and legal studies, while simultaneously presenting an important agenda for comparative research across Asian jurisdictions.

**Limitations**

Although this study employed a systematic and comprehensive approach, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The reliance on the Scopus database may have excluded relevant studies, particularly scholarship from the Global South and non-English publications. In addition, variations in legal systems, socio-cultural contexts, and policy frameworks were not examined through an in-depth comparative lens. These constraints, however, do not undermine the contribution of the findings; instead, they indicate directions for further inquiry.

## CONCLUSION

Research on transgender mental health has advanced considerably, particularly in relation to psychological well being, stigma, access to healthcare, and gender affirming services. Evidence consistently indicates higher risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation associated with discrimination and structural barriers. However, research examining the impact of legal regulations and public policies, especially in Asian contexts without affirmative legal frameworks, remains limited.

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**Competing Interest:** Author declares no conflicts of interest.

**Participant Ethics Consent and Agreement**

This study does not require ethical approval and participant consent

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