

LGBTI Elders, abuse, discrimination and other difficulties

The Tango Project report on 2017

Dr Catherine Barrett, Director Alice's Garage



We didn't think of it as abuse or discrimination. It was just the way things were. We thought we were in the wrong, so we just had to shut up and live silently.

The Tango Project was launched in 2017 by Dr Catherine Barrett, Director of Alice's Garage. The aim of the project is to address the difficulties (including abuse and discrimination) that LGBTI elders face on the basis of their LGBTI identities. The two-year project provides LGBTI Elders in Victoria with an Independent Third Party, Dr Catherine Barrett, to:

1. document the difficulties encountered
2. provide information to address difficulties
3. facilitate access advocacy or complaints services
4. identify patterns and strategies to prevent these difficulties.

The project is supported by a group of LGBTI Elders (pictured above) and a Project Advisory Group of eight Commissioners and Regulators. This document provides a brief overview of the first 12 months of the project from Jan – December 2017.

Sources of reporting

Of the 19 difficulties recorded, most were experienced by Trans and Gender Diverse people (11), with a smaller number of reports from older lesbians (7) and only one gay man.

It is interesting to note that only one difficulty was reported directly to the Project Coordinator – most were raised incidentally in conversations about the project. This is not surprising given many LGBTI Elders do not have a sense of entitlement, nor information about advocacy and complaint services. It is also interesting to note that the number of issues identified in conversation increased as the project progressed – this may be due to awareness raising and rapport building. It is expected that more reports of issues will be made retrospectively – and this document will be updated.

Difficulties shared

For the 2017 period (Jan-Dec), 19 difficulties were identified in conversation with LGBTI Elders. The most commonly reported form of abuse was lesbophobia. The group most commonly reporting difficulties was Trans and Gender Diverse (TGD) Elders – who experienced a range of issues. A brief overview of the issues is presented and the details are kept broad to protect the identities of participants. Key themes were:

- Lesbophobic abuse (5)
- Reduced/restricted service (4)
- Misgendering (3)
- Transphobic comments (3)
- Restriction of gender expression (3)
- Restriction to sexual expression (1)

Lesbophobic abuse

Four incidents of lesbophobic abuse occurred in the period of the Marriage Equality Postal Vote. This included two incidents of offensive comments on social media targeted at lesbian Elders; one case where two lesbians were vilified in a public facility after they were identified as lesbian and two incidents of lesbophobic abuse in public spaces (tram and cafe).

The vilification in public spaces was distressing for the Elders involved and in the case of the abuse that occurred on a tram, the lesbians were concerned for their safety. Information on blocking Social Media Trolls was provided to the lesbian Elder who received abuse on Twitter. In two cases LGBTI elders intervened to advocate for their counterparts with positive outcomes. There is a need for information and education on social media safety and to address community attitudes more broadly.

Reduced or restrictive service

In one residential aged care facility (RACF) a lesbian Elder received a negative response to disclosure and staff caring for her did not intervene in an incident of lesbophobic abuse from a co-resident. In another RACF, a Transwoman was “roughly handled” by a male staff who was noted by the resident to be ‘transphobic’. In a community health service, a Transwoman was told she could not use the female toilet and was required to use the disabled toilet instead.

The impacts of these incidents on LGBTI Elders were damaging. All were concerned about the quality of service they were receiving and none felt safe to make a complaint because they were reliant on the service – or wanted to continue using the service and felt their relationship with the service could be jeopardized if they complained. All reported there was a need for more education on LGBTI inclusivity for service providers. There is also a need for a process that enables LGBTI Elders to provide feedback on their experiences of services without disclosing their identities.

Misgendering

The misgendering of TGD people occurred in health and retail services, with devastating impacts. For example, in the crowded waiting room of a hospital, a Transwoman was called by a staff member, when she stood up and answered ‘yes’, the staff member called out across the waiting room, “I thought you would have been a woman”. The Transwoman reported feeling humiliated and uncomfortable receiving a service from this staff member as a result. In another other example, a Transwoman asked three times for a retail service provider to stop referring to her using a male pronoun. After the third occurrence, she raised her voice with him and the manager threatened to withdraw to the service from her for doing so.

Misgendering was humiliating for TGD people, particularly when this occurred in the presence of others. The lack of responsiveness to feedback about misgendering highlights power imbalances: the onus of responsibility is currently on TGD people to communicate in respectful and positive ways, even when service providers do not. Several TGD people reported it would be useful to have a deidentified way of providing feedback to services they were reliant on.

Transphobic comments

Three TGD Elders reported actions by some older lesbians that excluded TGD women who were not ‘born women’. This was reported to be particularly hurtful because the comments come from within LGBTI communities.

All TGD Elders who raised this issue also noted that there was a need to build relationships between some older lesbians and TGD women. It was also noted that a larger number of lesbian Elders embrace TGD women – but their voices are not privileged.

Restrictions to gender expression

Three Transgender women described restrictions to the expression of their gender identity by family members. This included adult children requiring a Trans women ‘present as male’ in front of grandchildren, and a parent who articulated they did not want to see their adult child ‘present as female’.

Relationships with family of origin are valued and so all TGD Elders complied with the restrictions imposed by family members. This conflict and restriction on their gender expression had a damaging effect on mental wellbeing. Several TGD Elders felt they were unable to fully be themselves and felt depressed as a consequence. Elders who experienced these difficulties did not want an intervention for their individual situation – they felt they needed to endure the restrictions to preserve family relationships. However, there was significant interest in the provision of general information on how to assert their rights, while preserving family relationships, as well as work to educate the broader community on respect for older TGD family members.

Restricted sexual expression

One gay man, who had recently come out after his wife died, wanted to connect with LGBTI communities, but experienced resistance from his adult children. He noted his children’s religious beliefs meant they did not approve of his homosexuality.

The Elder privileged the needs of his children – and this was a barrier to providing him with access to LGBTI events, groups or visitors. There is a need to educate the broader community about the importance of respecting Elders who come out (as gay, lesbian or bisexual) as older people.

Discussion

LGBTI Elders reported that they did not relate to the language of ‘abuse and discrimination’ – and asked that the language used in the project be changed to ‘challenges and difficulties’ (including abuse and discrimination). This may reflect a limited sense of entitlement LGBTI Elders have – historically, the onus of responsibility was LGBTI Elders to conform to social norms.

Only one report stemmed from a person making contact to the project coordinator directly. All other issues were raised when the project coordinator asked LGBTI Elders about their experiences. Given this factor – it is reasonable to expect that further conversations with other LGBTI Elders will reveal more issues – and we will document these as they are presented.

Most LGBTI Elders did not feel empowered to make a formal complaint or advocate on their own behalf and did not want the project coordinator to take direct action on their behalf. This reticence was reportedly due to the belief that doing so would exacerbate their difficulty e.g. lead to further LGBTIphobia in services they were reliant on; or create additional difficulties in families. However, all LGBTI Elders wanted skills to assert their rights more broadly to prevent the difficulties from reoccurring and wanted LGBTIphobia in services addressed.

Building relationships

A number of activities were undertaken during the first 12 months of the project to build relationships between LGBTI Elders – advocacy and complaints services and Government representatives. This included a meeting between LGBTI Elders and Ro Allen, Gender and Sexuality Commissioner on the Rural Equality Road Show. It also included a workshop for LGBTI Elders and advocacy/complaints services at a National LGBTI Conference to exchange ideas about addressing the issues LGBTI Elders face. Photos and films from the events were shared on social media to further build rapport.



Strategies for change

This draft report was reviewed at a meeting of LGBTI Elders and Victoria’s Commissioners. Two key actions were identified. The first is to develop strategies to build relationships between LGBTI Elders and their families of origin to ensure LGBTI identities are respected. Strategies need to include the provision of information and resources that enable LGBTI Elders to mediate positive outcomes in ways that do not further damage relationships

The second is to develop strategies to enable LGBTI Elders to provide feedback to services about LGBTIphobia – in ways that do not compromise their relationship with services they are reliant upon.

The Tango Project team are currently seeking funding for proposals to develop these strategies.

More information

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