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Submission in response to the Inquiry into arrangements for the postal survey

Dear Senator

Thank you for inviting Rainbow Families NSW to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry into *Arrangements for the postal survey*.

Rainbow Families NSW is the peak body for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) families in NSW.

Our families were front and centre during the debate about same-sex marriage last year.

We acknowledge the protections provided by the Parliament. However, despite these protections, our families ended up on the frontline of this divisive debate.

During the postal survey we saw and heard inaccurate and hateful things said about our families.

Our submission is comprised of the very real experiences of our community.

We thank the Committee for their consideration of our submission.

For further information, please contact us on 0481 565 958, or by email advocacy@rainbowfamilies.com.au.

Yours sincerely

Cathy Brown



About Rainbow Families NSW

Rainbow Families NSW was formed in 2015 as the peak body for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) families in NSW.

The mission of Rainbow Families is to build a community that fosters resiliency by connecting, supporting and empowering LGBTIQ families. Rainbow Families has a growing membership and includes people from across NSW.

Its volunteer Board consists of committed LGBTIQ members who share the common experience of raising families. Rainbow Families is in the final stages of registering as a charity under the Australian Charities and Not-for Profits Commission Act 2012.

Rainbow Families is an incorporated organisation, governed by a [constitution](#) which provides a structure for how the group operates.

What is a Rainbow Family?

A Rainbow Family is a same-sex or LGBTIQ parented family.

At Rainbow Families, we define a Rainbow Family as: any lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex person who has a child or children; or is planning on having a child or children by way of donor insemination (known or unknown), surrogacy (altruistic or commercial), foster care, foster to adoption, adoption (domestic or international), opposite sex relationship, co-parenting or other means.

Rainbow families, like many modern families, come in all shapes and sizes and are formed in many different ways. But the thing we all have in common is that our families are created through love.

Over thirty years of peer reviewed research into same-sex parented families shows that children from these families do as well as their peers from heterosexual-parented families.

For the community, by the community

Rainbow Families is a volunteer-led organisation, providing a network of support to children and families within the NSW LGBTIQ community.



Response to the terms of reference

The postal survey was a tough time for many in our community, particularly parents of young children who were exposed to leaflets, advertising and discussions that painted our families in an extremely negative light.

When the idea of a plebiscite was raised, Rainbow Families campaigned against a divisive public poll, precisely because when marriage equality was debated in France, Ireland, the US and UK, the children of same-sex couples became the focus of some hurtful statements and campaigns.

We did not want that to happen here.

The marriage debate was never about whether LGBTQI people can or should have children. We already do. In Australia, 33% of lesbians and 11% of gay men are parenting children already. In NSW same-sex parents may be registered on their child's birth certificate.

Even though the Parliament enacted protections against vilification, and to ensure that advertising aligned with existing electoral law on the authorisation of advertisements and banning misleading information about the process of voting, fraud, bribery and intimidation, **those protections were not enough to safeguard our families from ending up on the frontline of a divisive debate that caused great harm to many in our community.**

Despite the protections introduced in Parliament our community still received letters telling them that they and their families were unnatural, flyers, saw flyers propagating inaccuracies about HIV/AIDs and calling homosexuality a tragedy, read hate speech online and experienced bullying at school.

As the following stories demonstrate, members of our community were the targets of negative advertising, hatred, harassment and personal distress.

As a result, our submission focusses on the following term of reference:

- g. protections against offensive, misleading or intimidating material or behaviour, especially towards affected communities;*



The following case studies have been provided by members of our community about their experiences during the postal survey.

Kate,

We received two personalised letters from our neighbours expressing their traditional views on marriage and their negative thoughts about our family and the wider LGBTIQ community. We received the first letter on a Friday, the next the following day. The letters spoke about "militant lesbians storming our churches and mosques demanding to get married", that we have equal rights as evidenced by "being able to adopt and raise a child" (our son is not adopted). That the local community "tolerates you" and that "the silent majority will succeed".

*We cried for that whole weekend and were scared to check our letter box on the Sunday - we believed we were going to receive more hurtful letters from different neighbours. We started to think about moving out of the area? But unfortunately we can't afford to move. We stopped going to the local parks, we avoided going to the local supermarket. We became hermits and didn't want to be seen in the local community. My heart rate went up every time I opened the front door and went out the front for fear of seeing the neighbours. **We tried to shield our 2-year-old son from our pain - but he could see it. One night he said "I'm scared of the neighbours". This was so upsetting to hear.** Neighbours who we had been friendly with started being less friendly - or were we just being paranoid? My partner and I both took sick days off from work and we also left our home and area for safer more accepting areas to try and get away from it all. The result of the survey gave us no joy. We were relieved with the result but our relief quickly turned to anger, fear and pain again when we soon found out we live in the highest "no" voting electorate. We went through all of the emotions again - making plans to move - as how can we bring up our son in this area?. But again reaching the same impossible conclusion.*



Holly

*I don't have specific examples to give but I want to put it on record that I have been out and proud for seventeen years and the day of the results was the first time in my life that I've ever cried about my sexuality. It was then, standing surrounded by my community hearing the results being read out, that I realised how vulnerable I've felt over the last few months. **Having my life and my heart and my family under the microscope and my safety at the whim of the entire voting population of this country has been so damaging to my mental health. I have felt anxious walking down the street, at playgroup, and in the shops.***

Every person I've walked past I've wondered, do they think I deserve equal rights?

Every time I've logged on to Facebook I've seen the hate messages.

Every queer friend I've spoken to I've seen their grief and their pain.

The damage this has done to me and my community is irreversible. I will never be able to unknow that over 30% of people don't think I am equal to them.



Matthew

This morning I found this lovely piece of reading in my letter box. Some of the assumptions (although not the worst we have heard) are vile and I'm sure you will agree complete B.S. I have since been advised this same flyer has previously been found around [other suburbs].

Urging Australian to cast a vote and say "NO" to Same Sex Marriage Legislation !!!

Homosexuality is a curse of death in terminating the family line and without decedents!

The sexual behaviour of anal sex among some homosexuals is one of the main source of HIV/AIDS transmission !

Homosexuality is a tragedy of a family, a grave to the family bloodline, a curse of family sonlessness!

✘. If Same Sex Marriage legislation is passed, it would be a threat to the safety of women, creating great fear and harm to them. For by then, there would be no separate public toilets, change rooms or shower rooms for the male and female , the transexual "counterfeit" women will be protected under the law, to enter the female toilets including those at schools legally. This may give rise to the rapists who may masquerade as a "transexual woman" sneaking into the public "forbidden land" for men. these places may then become easy sports for rapists to target a woman victim. The number of victims being raped in public female changing rooms and bathrooms in those countries that has passed the Same Sex Marriage Legislation is a stunning fact to all!

Please be firm and vote "NO" to the Same Sex Marriage Legislation!

Provoke not the curse of terminating the family bloodline and without decedents!

Please note : The government will start sending the plebiscite ballot paper for Same Sex Marriage legislation on September 12, 2017, Your vote must be returned before November 7, 2017



Justine

It was not until the Yes vote result was announced that we noticed the impact the plebiscite had on our daughter. When the results were announced our daughter, who is 6 years old, was cheering and running up and down our hallway.

She was cheering "Yes, now I can live with both my mums forever"! She was under the impression if the result was No we would have to live separately!! I was devastating to think she was carrying around this stress the whole time.

Nicole

This survey has occupied my every waking moment, it has left me unable to concentrate at work, emotionally vulnerable, and all resilience I did have has gone. I've been out and proud for over 2 decades. I live my life as a strong, vocal feminist lesbian and yet this survey has been extremely difficult for me and my family. You want specific examples? Ok, here's just a few: my 7-year old daughter comes home and asks if she's going to need to find a new family if we lose the vote; or there's the time when she matter-of-factly[sic] states that she's going to ask her therapist (she's autistic) whether she's going to grow up ok because she has two Mums; or there's the daily abuse on social media because I refuse to be silenced, or maybe it's the nagging doubt in my head every time I meet someone new: did you vote yes?

I didn't go to work on November 15. I needed to be surrounded by people I loved and who loved me. I felt no joy and happiness when the results were announced. I felt only relief and anger. The next day, I couldn't stop crying. Politicians might think this was just a theoretical process, just another vote, but it isn't and it wasn't. This has literally destroyed people's lives.



Kylie

Social media posts on LGBTQI+ Facebook pages became inundated with some really hateful comments, these pages are usually our safe haven but instead became places for ppl to verbally attack us. My teenage daughter who identifies as Bisexual was taunted relentlessly at school by other teens saying my parents are voting no, and degrading the gay community. Posters went up on light posts in our area stating "You can vote no" as well as some graffiti on a bus stop.

It saddened my children and I to see the outpouring of hate, it changed our view on our neighbours and country. It scared my children and I that there was so much hate hidden in our suburb, we had had no idea that there were ppl in our area that considered us less than human and we felt afraid for our safety often. My children have been introduced to a particularly nasty and dangerous form of homophobia that they didn't realise was around, my teen especially is very fearful of ppl. We participated in the marches/rallies where we were verbally abused by an elderly man on the sidelines. I expected that but my children were rocked. I feel they have lost some of their innocence.

Erin

At work. Comments defending no voters and believing that they were hard done by. Not using inclusive language and policies working with the broader community.

Anxiety. Stress. We have a new baby and we were worried we would be targeted. Also tensions at work, people expressing their opinion. General homophobia and transphobia.



Trent

Car tyres slashed in [my suburb]. Left me feeling scared and angry.

Jade

We have two children, a one-year-old and six-year-old. It has been incredibly difficult explaining to our six-year-old daughter why people are voting on whether or not her two mums can get married.

We have stopped watching mainstream TV so she doesn't have to see the horrendous no ads. I frequently have to change the channel on the radio so she is not exposed to some of the horrible things being said about her family. I'm so scared of what it will mean to her if the outcome is no

Amy

I encountered hurtful material - whether news items or articles or people's reactions to them.

The entire conversation was degrading - having people discuss the legitimacy of your relationship, your family, your existence... was horrible, saddening and crushed my self-confidence.

Glenn

It was going ok until yesterday when we got a letter to my stepfather who has been dead for 6 years saying please vote no from the Australian Christian Lobby it sickens me to think they can stoop that low to ask the dead.



It makes me feel sick as I don't know how my mother is feeling about it to know people are going after the dead and how the hell they even got his name and address.

Rachael

At work and I was questioned as to why we needed to be married under the same legislation as normal couples. I was also asked at work a number of questions about the why it should change and what it means to me.

My wife and I go to counselling to talk it through so that we can manage and not have our feelings effect our babies. We are saddened every day and are very tired of how our right to marry apparently will affect the schooling of children, the way others decide to life their own lives. It's disgraceful. I have been out for over 20 years and I have been gay bashed. But never have I felt more exposed, more vulnerable and more discriminated against then I do today. I am lucky that we have a very positive foot print in our whole community. But I am more cautious these days as to how I am perceived and how my children will be treated. Raising a debate between a minority group and a majority group had no prosperity of being fair, honest or a positive experience.

When in history has a debate between two sides of inequality even turned our an equal decision?

This has been and will continue to be an intrusive and heart crushing experience for every member of the LGBTIQ community. The sad thing is that it would end at the postal vote, the politicians that are majority privileged Caucasians have drawn a long lasting bow and target on us all and for a length of time to come. This is not over, not even close it has drawn deep wounds that will take generations to heal.



Lisa

My family received two homophobic letters from two different sets of neighbours. The letters were written in response to a letter we put in the mailboxes on our street. In our letter we explained how much we love the cultural diversity of the area and that we felt we'd been accepted into the community, and we asked our neighbours to consider not throwing their survey in the bin. They may not realise it but there are families like ours in the community that the result matters to. The letters were hand delivered to our address in [our suburb], NSW. On the day the first marriages took place a portaloo sign was attached to our front fence, presumably by the same neighbour/s. They are elderly, Anglo, Christians.

I opened the first letter in front of my 2-year-old and broke down. I did not know what to say apart from 'some people do not like us', which I have regretted ever since. *My partner and I felt very low for months and we are only now (January 2018) feeling more like ourselves again, but having to navigate around the neighbours who wrote the letters is uncomfortable. We did not want to leave the house for weeks. Before this I did not care what people thought of me but i felt paranoid about what all of our other neighbours thought of us and scared of receiving more letters. I still steel myself in case I find another letter everytime I open the mailbox now, months later. We moved to the area from the inner west of Sydney a few years ago and had felt very settled, welcomed and happy there until the postal survey. Now since the result (our electorate posted the highest number of no votes in the country) we are considering moving as we are unsure whether our two year old will be accepted when he starts school in a few years.*



Rosalie

I encountered the most horrific part of this plebiscite watching Q&A with the leader of the VoteNo campaign making me feel the hurt and the unacceptable homophobia from uneducated idiots sprouting hate under the guise of freedom of speech i

Jerrilee

*Generally hateful discriminatory messages on social media from "friends" and family. Specifically **saying that same sex couples are in the same category as paedophiles, bestiality and polygamy.***

I sometimes feel preoccupied with doubts and negative thoughts. I am worried about the discrimination my children will experience as a direct result of the negative and misleading information being spread by the "vote no" campaign.

Jenny

Negative advertising from No campaign targeting my son and our parenting.

Radio advertising and commentary

Very distressing and relentless. My 10 yo son asking why we can't get married and why are people so mean to our family.

Jacqueline

I have so many incidents I don't even know where to begin. First up just hearing people public ally tell me over social media or regular news spots that my family (of two children being raised by two mums) is somehow so



disgusting that the children will be the next "stolen generation" was my low point.

It completely unpicked my confidence about the place I am allowed in society. I feel blamed for a range of conflated things that hurt me.

The linking of gender and sexuality has been so painful and frustrating.

To see billboards and posters and to live in Bulimba and see a man attacked for standing up for gay marriage has been hard.

I've never felt more marginalised or offended and never have I felt so blamed and marginalised. Not in twenty plus years of being out. And that's saying a lot given I came out when I was still illegal in Qld to have gay sex.

The worst thing was when my kids felt the impact. My son is seven and in grade 2. Once it was all over the news and people were discussing it, some children in his class were giving him a hard time and saying he can't call me and the other woman raising him both "Mum". That one of us was a real mum and the other wasn't. After six weeks of giving him strategies I went to the class teacher and asked if she could do two things. One, intervene on his behalf and two, talk to the class about diversity of families. She agreed to intervene and stop the children giving him a hard time, but declined to talk to the class and have time the instruction that she was instructed by the Principal that they were not to discuss same sex marriage. I reiterated that I didn't want her to do that, but to talk about diversity of families within their curriculum. She said it would be politicising things. She then said that As a way of explanation for one boys behaviour, that he came from a very catholic family and they have their strong beliefs like you do. I don't have beliefs - I have two children being raised by two women. It was brutal.

It was devastating and has been awful to hear people talk about how disgusting my family is, how I'm to blame for the downfall of society, that



children will be scarred for life because I may wish to marry. I genuinely felt unsafe. Scared. Unable to stop thinking about what people think of me, about how religion gets to decide morals they themselves have struggled historically to uphold. I tried to find a counsellor to talk to so I could get back some resilience. **I rang Lifeline in the end. I told the lovely woman what was going on for me. I told her my kids were receiving flak at school. She asked if I had a husband to talk to. It nearly broke me. Even when reaching out for help, I had to overcome a lack of visibility or possibility.** It's been exhausting. I eventually got off social media for a while and that helped. I'm yet to contact the Principal at my child's school because I'm not sure I can handle the conflict. Mostly I am angry that this has been allowed. I'm a mid-40s strong well politicised woman. Imagine the young questioning kids and how this would feel to them. I'm still unsure why this vitriol was allowed.

Kelly

Friends and family posting "No" articles on Facebook, watching TV and seeing "No" ads each evening

We have disconnected from Facebook by deleting the app, allowing limited access on our computer.

Katie

On Thursday 5/10/17 my same-sex partner and I went to the [local] Medical and Dental centre for a new referral for our fertility clinic we had seen our regular Dr whom we've been seeing for years and she has been with us every step of the way through our fertility journey, we had seen her for every blood test, waited hours just to see her, we came to her after miscarriages, after tears and have spoken openly to her about our fears and troubles and put all our trust into her being our doctor.



Now after asking for our referral after 3 failed attempts of fertility treatments the Dr started asking about the donor process, which we've explained many times with her we have never had a problem educating people on the topic but that's when it started to get unprofessional the Dr started referring to the donor as a father which we corrected her and she asked if he would have contact with the future child we explained that he would not as we would be using an unknown donor to which she then told us about how we are wrong for being in a same-sex relationship and wrong for wanting a family and how the donor is the father and i am the biological mother that he should see the child and that my partner is not in the picture that she has no right because she is not a biological parent about how same-sex parenting will harm the child because it will not have a biological father in the picture and then I started being asked inappropriate questions about my sexuality about if I had ever been with a man and that if I want a child I should be with a man and then insulting my partner who was in the room with me making her feel insignificant and ended with my partner and i both leaving in tears.

It has affected myself and my whole family its destroyed our faith in humanity, by opening a door of hate and discrimination making us feel unsafe to the people treat our health, the people who we trust our lives with everyday, the people who hold our life in their hands now they believe it's their right to take it away, this postal plebiscite has not been about if same sex couples should marry but opened the door to discrimination and uneducated fear mongering this plebiscite has not just affected myself and my same-sex relationship it has affected everyone in my whole entire family, my friends and it has emotionally scared all of us.

I'm afraid to hold my partners hand for fears of conflict, that some stranger will attack me or tell me how wrong i am because of my sexually or tell my why I shouldn't have basic rights because the lady on the tv add said that they're going to teach kids gay intercourse in primary schools or because that man said you would boycott my business so i voted no to your rights.



The plebiscite has disregarded any truth and has allowed Australia to openly attack and discriminate me on a very personal level and my family attacked because of my sexuality and their differences as i come from a family that isn't normal by social standards so it has affected all of us by all the hate around children should be with biological parents my grandmother couldn't give birth and had a hysterectomy at 21, so my mother was adopted in 1972, my mother had 3 marriages so i have 3 fathers and 6 siblings, 2 by blood, 3 by marriage and 1 adopted brother because his biological parents mistreated him and harmed him. This plebiscite has been the most mentally harming thing in my life and has given Australians the legal right to hurt just me but all people that dont fit into the social norms. I just feel that im less than human this plebiscite has made me personally feel like im garbage and it has affected my mental health and wellbeing, I go to work and come home im to afraid to go anywhere else and because of this postal plebiscite i can't even see my trusted dr for help. This is how it has affected me.

Sue

I received a postcard in the mail telling me children deserve a mother and a father and to vote "no". There was no identification of where this postcard came from. Obviously to avoid any backlash

I do not identify as lesbian. I was married for 28 years and then happen to fall in love with a woman. I still regard myself as heterosexual. We have a three year old child. I am just as qualified to bring up a child in my same sex relationship as I was when I was "married". Having children has nothing to do with being married. It is just scare mongering.



Adrienne

My girlfriend arrived home (she lives with another lesbian couple who also have a baby) and found a flyer in the letter box: "Every child deserves a mother and a father, vote NO".



We felt upset and actually it made me doubt her neighbours: who did this? I've been finding I feel like people look at me now when I am out with her, I feel more self-conscious and I realise I have internalised some of the disapproval and hatred, I feel upset that there is the suggestion that somehow I am not giving my child what he deserves. We made our own version of this to cheer ourselves up (every child deserves a butch and a femme), but of course, I didn't show it to my 8 year old son, he is very sensitive about this and has taken it all very personally.



Conclusion

The postal survey was a tough time for many in our community, particularly parents of young children who were exposed to leaflets, advertising and discussions that painted our families in an extremely negative light.

As highlighted in the personal stories in this submission, this process has caused damage will take a long time to heal.

LGBTIQ people are strong and resilient. Before the plebiscite, we called on the Government not to inflict a damaging hurtful debate on our families.

While legislative protections were introduced by the Commonwealth Parliament, these did not stop members of our community being exposed to damaging, inaccurate and hurtful material.

We thank the Committee for your important work, and call on you to ensure that no other community has a process like this inflicted on them in the future.