

Submission to the Victorian Government LGBTIQ+ Strategy

This report is written on behalf of Matrix Guild of Vic Inc: A Voice for Lesbians 40 and Older.

We appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to Victoria's LGBTIQ Strategy and we see this as an excellent opportunity to have input, and hopefully influence Victoria's roadmap for the future.

This submission is being written from an older lesbian point of view. We see ourselves as a separate and distinct group within the LGBTIQ community. Many Matrix members came out as lesbians a long time ago and take pride in being lesbians. Although we obviously have things in common with all the other groups invited to make submissions to the Victorian Government LGBTIQ Strategy, the groups under this umbrella are not homogenous. Of course, we support the rights of all other LGBTIQ groups to pursue their own separate identities, ambitions and values, and we are united in fighting sexism, homophobia and LGBTIQ oppression.

As lesbians though, we want to be valued as a separate group, as lesbians who have struggled to find and hold to their identity. And whilst there are differences among lesbians, as a group we are much more likely to have things in common with each other than with other groups under the LGBTIQ umbrella.

We don't want to lose our identity in the general mix of the LGBTIQ+ community because it is convenient for governments and organisations to see us as all part of the one group.

In general, this submission does not presume to speak for other groups within the LGBTIQ community. We feel sure that they are more than capable of speaking for themselves.

We propose to address only some of the major themes of the Discussion Paper that accompanied calls for input to the Victorian Government's LGBTIQ strategy.

Health

It was very disappointing but not all that unexpected to read in the Discussion Paper that LGBTIQ communities still fare worse than the general community on many health indicators. Amongst other indicators of wellbeing, people within LGBTIQ communities continue to experience higher rates of abuse and discrimination, higher levels of anxiety and depression, poorer physical health, a lower sense of self-worth and less of a sense that life is worthwhile than the general population.

Considering that lesbians are likely to need mental health and other health services as much or more than the broader population, mental health services need to be fully trained to properly respond to the needs of lesbians.

Hopefully there will be excellent submissions from LGBTIQ communities made to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and they will be acted upon.

Primary and Secondary School Education.

Schooling is compulsory for all children in the state. This can be in a state school, a private school, which is often faith-based, or, under certain conditions, at home. Whilst many children can and do benefit from being taught at home, we have some concerns about the lack of exposure these children may have to ideas that may challenge their family of origin's values. Home schooling therefore is problematic in our view because there is little if any oversight as to the content and values of what is being taught.

Because, for most children attending school is compulsory, it is incumbent on the state to take responsibility for ensuring that all children feel safe at school, and are respected and valued for who they are. However, according to the Discussion Paper, for many students, school is not a safe place. It is our school age children who have the highest rate of suicide and attempted suicide in Australia.

Schools have to take more responsibility for the welfare of the students placed in their care. The Discussion Paper states that 'over half of LGBTIQ kids face discrimination and abuse for their sexual orientation and gender identity' in schools.

It was further noted in the Discussion Paper that there is an overlap between neurodiversity and people in the LGBTIQ community, and also that there is a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders than other groups who are members of the LGBTIQ community. These are also groups that are not well catered for in schools.

The Safe Schools program went some way to supporting LGBTIQ students in schools. According to information on the New Idea Website, the program was directed at Principals and teachers and 'simply teaches students and teachers to be kinder, more sensitive, and more inclusive to LGBTI youth . . . (H)owever, criticism from conservatives and traditionally-minded politicians, as well as moral panic regarding the supposed queering of children, contributed to the ceasing of (the Turnbull) government funding of a national program.

<https://www.newidea.com.au/safe-schools-program-what-is-it-what-does-it-teach>

As a consequence of these attacks, the number of schools who have adopted the Safe Schools Program has fallen over time. The Victorian Education Department and adults that have the care of children must take on these right-wing homophobic politicians, school administrations, and school councils who present their outrage at the Safe Schools Program as support for children, when they are really launching attacks against LGBTIQ children. Their attitude is likely to hurt young people and young people do not have the means to fight against their campaign. It is not a problem that young people can fix. We know the distress that the Same Sex Marriage debate caused in the LGBTIQ community. Imagine the distress that the debate over Safe Schools has caused some of our students.

As an ex-teacher and a lesbian, who started teaching in Victorian state secondary schools in 1979 and ended my teaching career in 2008, I felt that homophobia got worse over time instead of better.

What can be done?

- Religious organisations, like all other employers, should not have the right to not employ, or fire employees, based on their sexual identity and gender orientation, particularly, in the case of teachers.
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersex and queer teachers can provide healthy role models for students.
- All teachers, no matter where they teach, should be educated about LGBTIQ communities.
- All children in state and private schools should be provided with age appropriate Sex Education classes that address issues of identity, including gender identity and sexual orientation. They should also cover issues of safety. A comprehensive sex education program, directed at a level suitable for the child, would foster feelings of safety, and greater self-awareness. Students would be more aware of the issues facing other children too and better placed to make informed decisions about their own values.

Denial of information and secrecy around topics related to sexuality and identity is more likely to harm children than protect them.

- Students should be encouraged to participate in school advisory bodies which provide a forum for having input into school programs and policies.
- School management needs to actively support the rights of LGBTIQ students, by normalising gender identities and sexual orientation, and encouraging a sense of acceptance and self-worth.
- Public acknowledgment of LGBTIQ communities would benefit all students and staff. Guest speakers from a range of groups could be invited to the school for example, and posters put up. I note though that at one school I worked in, the only place lesbian and gay friendly posters were displayed was in the staff room.
- Providing information about programs such as The Safe School Program to parents at orientation sessions may allay any fears they have. Many parents want to know that their children will be in a safe and nurturing environment. Not all parents with gender or neurologically diverse children, or children from minority ethnic backgrounds are blind to the fact that their children are likely to be discriminated against and bullied. For that matter, some parents themselves will have been bullied at school.
- All teachers should be given sex education units in their own teacher education courses and these courses must cover issues relating to the LGBTIQ community. Many new teachers have had limited life experience themselves. They will face a diversity of children in their teaching careers and need to be challenged in their thinking and values so that they can better ensure that all children feel respected and cared for by their teachers.
- Teaching, like all the caring professions, is likely to have a relatively high proportion of people who are themselves part of the LGBTIQ community. We think a more inclusive Safety and Sex Ed program for students, and a greater acceptance of student diversity, would also increase a sense of safety and security for teachers in general and provide a more inclusive workplace for them.

To be in a minority in any school, but likely more so in faith-based schools, is extremely difficult for a young student who would know, without being told, that who and what they are is 'wrong' if they deviate from the norm in any way. This does not bode well for a child's future mental health and sense of well-being, feelings of acceptance and ability to fulfill their potential in life.

When students better understand themselves and are proud of who they are, and where they are accepted as valuable members of the society they live in whatever their sexuality or gender orientation, surely they will have a greater sense of belonging, be more resilient, be healthier and be less in need of mental health services in the future.

Higher Education

When I was at University, in the Whitlam years, tertiary fees were abolished but all students had to belong to the Student Union, and the money paid to join the union went to fund clubs that students created. There were groups of all kinds to cover everyone's interests. For example, I was a member of The University of Melbourne's Women's Liberation Group, belonged to a Lesbian Consciousness Raising Group and was on the Melbourne University Film Society (MUFS) Committee.

The Women's Liberation Group received funding for conferences and dances. It was given a room and some basic funding for a childcare centre for students with children. We had access to meeting rooms where we held regular meetings and to printing services where we could get leaflets, newsletters and conference papers printed. The Student Union building provided services and spaces for students that enhanced their lives at university.

Course fees were introduced and have continued to climb over time. Compulsory Student Unionism was disbanded and in our view, a very important part of university life disappeared. Previously, many students found their way into politics or unionism through Student Union clubs and this was probably a major reason for a Liberal-National Party Government to dump it.

Today, to pay the fees for tertiary education many students have to work. For them, compulsory union fees would be much more difficult to pay for than they were when university education was free. Because many tertiary students work, they would likely have little time to enjoy the benefits of university clubs and become involved in political, cultural and social groups, even if there were any.

The pressure of attracting foreign students to make up for the loss of funding from the federal government has led to a more conservative approach in tertiary education. A lot of foreign students come from countries that deny lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and intersex people exist and some foreign students may fear being reported to their own governments if they get involved in LGBTIQ groups. Universities should be places where diversity and freedom of thought and speech are encouraged. It seems that because our universities are dependent on foreign students to fund their courses they are reluctant to put foreign governments offside.

Employment

According to the Discussion Paper, work places often feel less safe and more insecure for lesbians than for other women. Many lesbians hide their sexual identity at work, and, like women in general are more likely to be employed in part-time or casual work and be paid less. They are also more likely to be subject to bullying or fear of being bullied because of exposure of their sexuality.

Actions for work places

- Each work place needs to develop anti-bullying policies and make sure all staff members are aware of them.
- Be inclusive of sexual differences.
- Employ gender diverse workers, and diverse workers in general and promote them on merit.
- Ensure that there are Equal Opportunity Officers that are approachable and available to staff, who take claims of bullying, sexual harassment and coercion seriously and actively address these issues in the workplace.
- Do not victimize the victim.

Sport

In this weekend's round of the Australian Football League (AFL), St Kilda played the Sydney Swans in the Pride Round. This is the fifth year they have done so. In partnership with Vic Health, St Kilda, along with the other AFL clubs and administration, has put considerable effort into promoting diversity in sport.

Referring to the 2019 Pride Round on their webpage, the St Kilda Football Club cites 'the 2015 study *Out On The Fields* which found that 80% of those involved in sport in Australia believed gays and lesbians were not accepted within the sporting community'. Furthermore, 'Nine out of 10 young people felt they could not be honest about their sexuality for fear of discrimination, while Australia had the highest number of gay men who believed they were not "at all accepted" in sport'.

In reference to this year's round, the club says that the Pride Round is 'Designed to promote inclusion in sport and ensure the LGBTIQ+ Community feel welcomed at the footy'.

Still, as yet no AFL player has publically acknowledged that they are gay. In contrast, a number of Australian Football League Women (AFLW) players are out and proud and for them this does not seem to be an issue. This suggests that AFL management, AFL club administrations and Vic Health still have a long way to go to make the AFL a gay friendly work place.

The openness of lesbian women in the AFLW (who's courage is to be commended) has no doubt encouraged young lesbian women to feel that they can more fully participate in sport. It will be interesting to follow the rate of participation of lesbians in sport over time.

The Police Force.

I was surprised to read in the Discussion Paper that police training is 'sadly lacking', regarding exposure to LGBTIQ issues and that some serving police officers have had no LGBTIQ+ courses in their training at all. It is likely that recruits will come into the force with the same prejudices, understandings and ignorance as the general population. It can be assumed that police recruits, and long term officers have had little education elsewhere regarding lesbians and have often been exposed to all the homophobic prejudices that pervade the general population.

Most of us are happy to see police march in our Pride March and it was a step forward when, some years ago Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers were appointed. Unfortunately though, and again according to the Discussion Paper, a high proportion of police have never met with one.

Whilst the employment of a more diverse police force is welcomed, this diversity can also present new problems that need to be addressed. A lack of trust towards the police force was mentioned in the Discussion Paper. In many cultures and ethnic groups, including our own, women are often considered second-class citizens. Women in general are hesitant to report domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape because they fear that the police will not take their claims seriously or treat them respectfully. When police treat all women with respect and as equals, women will be more willing to trust them.

We acknowledge that the police force is trying to address this sexism and homophobia, but clearly this is not an attitude that is easily or quickly changed.

It is incumbent on the state to ensure that all police have training around issues related to LGBTIQ communities and that the police understand their responsibilities in defending the rights and safety of all its citizens. As an employer, the state is responsible for the standard of its police force. As employees of the state, the police force must meet those standards.

Actions:

- Employ more police from diverse backgrounds and cultures
- Employ more LGBTIQ police officers and make sure that these police are not put into situations where they are 'one out' in their place of employment.
- Employ more women police.
- Do not turn a blind eye to anti LGBTIQ+ bullying of police officers, for if police feel free to bully their colleagues inside their police stations, they will feel free to bully LGBTIQ people, and people from particular ethnic backgrounds on the streets.

Prisons

Prisons should be run by the state and be places of education and reform. All prisoners should be treated with respect. Prison administrators need to be carefully selected and have a focus on rehabilitation. Prison administration needs to be transparent.

All prison guards should be carefully selected so that they are fit and proper people to care for the people in their care.

Special facilities and private spaces should be provided to ensure the safety and well being of LGBTIQ prisoners.

Homelessness.

Lesbians have higher rates of mental health issues and disabilities, and are more likely to have two or more chronic illnesses. They experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, and lower rates of pay on average compared with the broader community. They are also more likely to have experienced family violence, and suffer financial distress after relationship breakdown. It is no surprise therefore that lesbians find it more difficult than others to afford to buy or rent a home of their own.

A major reason for the formation of the Matrix Guild was to provide housing for lesbians in older age. Chris Sitka's Submission to the Royal Commission on Safety and Quality in Aged Care Services 2019 provides an excellent report on issues facing older lesbians in aged care, and homelessness.

Like other lesbians, Matrix Guild members have limited finances. Nevertheless, the Matrix Guild has done what it can to procure housing for women who would otherwise be in danger of homelessness. So far, with bequests from past members and in conjunction with the Women's Property Initiative, we have managed to buy seven units for older lesbians to live in at community housing rates. Four of these are currently being built.

I will mention here that several Matrix Guild members including myself are members of a group called Older Women In Cohousing (WINC). We are currently negotiating to buy some land in Daylesford and build 28 or so units for older lesbians on it. This is a cohousing project, and cohousing projects have proven lifestyle and health benefits for their members. While some women are able to buy their units outright, and around four units will be owned by Women's Property Initiative and rented out as community housing, about eight women cannot afford to buy their units on their own.

We have been seeking the support of the Victorian Government to assist us with development funds, that together with the money these women have, would enable them to be part of this project. We have not been successful so far and have been told that a major reason for the Victorian Government not granting funds to us is that we are not inclusive enough of other groups under the GBTIQ+ umbrella.

Clearly housing is a big issue for many people who come under the umbrella of GBTIQ communities too. The government should therefore consider targeting community housing for these groups. I know that statistics can tell many stories, but from your own discussion paper, members of the LGBTIQ+ communities are in the greatest need. And within that group, older women are now at the greatest risk of homelessness.