# Mapping the journeys of LGBTIQ people experiencing family violence

Early insights from people with lived experience

May 2018





### Introduction

The LGBTI Family Violence Pathways Mapping project has been initiated by Family Safety Victoria's (FSV's) Diversity, Engagement and Strategy Branch to develop a better understanding of the pathways of LGBTI people who experience family violence through the current family violence service system.

The project involves two workshops:

- the first with LGBTI community members who have experienced family violence
- the second with LGBTI stakeholders, family violence service sector representatives and government stakeholders.

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation has been engaged by FSV to design and facilitate both workshops, analyse content from the sessions and develop outputs for use afterward.

The project aims to develop a shared understanding across the sector of barriers and service gaps for people in LGBTI communities. The outcomes of the project will help inform policy direction and projects to support LGBTI people experiencing family violence.

This document is a report from the first workshop, held with LGBTI people with lived experience of family violence who are now working in the area of family violence. The Victorian Government's Victim Survivors' Advisory Council also contributed to this report.

Many thanks to those who participated in workshop one and/or contributed to this report, and also to Drummond Street Services and the Victorian AIDS Council for supporting the workshop.

The willingness of LGBTI people with lived experience of family violence to share their stories helps us have a greater understanding of some of the main barriers and challenges for LGBTI people experiencing family violence, and supports us to keep working to improve the system for others in the future.

We are at a phenomenally important time in the history of designing future strategies to prevent and minimise the harm from Family Violence [for LGBTIQ people].

# Emerging insight into the experience of accessing support

#### 1. 'There is no system'

Many LGBTIQ people experiencing family violence feel that there is no family violence system that is accessible to, or inclusive of, them. While they experience family violence at similar or higher rates to non-LGBTIQ people, the experience of LGBTIQ people is largely invisible within mainstream responses. The new LGBTIQ integrated services model is the first specialist service to fill this gap but is still in its infancy and facing the challenge of establishing safe networks or bridges to the mainstream service system.

#### 2. Community Strength

For many, personal resilience and the support of LGBTIQ community members has become the substitute or proxy for what many experience as a non-existent service system. Support and safety is largely provided by trusted community networks rather than professionals. Creating safe social circles is an essential first step for validation, taking action, supplementing or replacing the mainstream service sector, and ongoing safety. Awareness of family violence within LGBTIQ communities is growing but is still limited by mainstream understandings of family violence as occurring in heterosexual, cisgendered relationships.

#### 3. Entry Points

System entry points do exist, but many professionals lack an awareness of what family violence against LGBTIQ people looks like and what referral pathways there are that are inclusive, informed and safe. LGBTIQ people are having contact with: counsellors, medical professionals and general practitioners, workplaces, schools, spiritual centres, and mainstream general services.

#### 4. Gut Feeling

For many, the first step toward help is validating and acknowledging the 'gut feeling' that something is not quite right. This gut feeling can be suppressed or difficult to trust though given the mainstream understanding of family violence as occurring in heterosexual, cisgendered relationships.

7. Help-seeking Risks

• Escalating a partner's control

violence:

sector

networks

Seeking knowledge or assistance can trigger more

• Violence or homo/bi/transphobia from service

· Backlash from community or close family

#### 5. That One Person

LGBTIQ people experiencing family violence are battling ongoing discrimination and self doubt in relation to whether their experience amounts to family violence. Many have expressed the value of just one person who helped them to validate their experience and know that it's not their fault. Without this, people may remain in a state of confusion and are at risk of staying within a violent situation. LGBTIQ professionals with lived experience were named as a most helpful support.

#### 8. Structural Violence

Many LGBTIQ people experience additional violence or re-abuse by the system when seeking or accessing professional help:

- •Trans/homo/biphobia
- Being misgendered
- Made to feel it's their fault or that they're the perpetrator
- Minimisation of violence
- No offers of help or workers being dismissive of their experiences

#### 6. Help-seeking Hesitation

There's a hesitancy to seek or access professional help for many reasons. Many people:

- Don't know that help is available (or it may not be available)
- Don't know where to find help
- Are aware that there is an absence of LGBTIQ-inclusive services
- Don't see themselves in the mainstream family violence response system
- Fear discrimination by the sector, backlash from community members or ostracisation from their community
- $\bullet \ \, \text{Don't feel worthy of receiving help} \\$

### **Key Factors**

to accessing and benefiting from help

#### Barriers in accessing help

- Failing to recognising their experience as family violence due to the invisibility of LGBTIQ people in family violence discourse
- Lack of LGBTIQ-specific or inclusive services
- Not knowing what LGBTIQ-safe supports are available
- Having to fit into binary service access criteria
- Being misgendered and therefore receiving inappropriate referrals or being disrespected
- The dismissal (by professionals) of a victim's experience of intimate partner violence as mutual

#### What works

- Safety in a service and safety at home
- People who understand the nature of violence within an LGBTIQ context
- Support to recover from trauma
- People who validate LGBTIQ people's experiences of family violence
- People you can trust

## Voices of what the support system has been like

Medical professionals –
especially in the 'trans specific'
medical sphere – play God and
use their power to control our
lives and bodies.

There is no 'after'
[experiencing family violence]. It's there forever. I'm still so angry, but I'm working on it.

Family Violence doesn't discriminate. LGBTIQ people aren't immune.

What was going through my head? Make it work or die.

There was one counselor who met me where I was, validated me and my experience, understood what it meant to be LGBTIQ and that made all the difference.

Everything I did to survive. I'm proud of myself for that and my acts of resistance.

Sometimes it feels like there's nothing for me. My experience is so poorly understood.

# Coming in contact with the system and seeking help

### 4 Contact Pathways

Conversations with LGBTIQ people with lived experience highlighted that there are four key ways LGBTIQ people who are experiencing family violence might come in contact with supports.

#### 1. Outside the system

People seek help outside of the family violence service system, often with the support of community and from a counselor.

#### 2. Point of crisis

People access family violence supports as a result of receiving a lateral support during a point of crisis (e.g. mental health, alcohol and other drugs, homelessness).

There are a number of ways in which LGBTIQ people come in contact with a system actor who could be a first point of entry. These points of contact vary in their helpfulness for victim survivors often depending on the professional's understanding of family violence and within the LGBTIQ context. Although currently underutilised effectively, each could become opportunity areas to offer support to people in need.

#### 3. System support

(identity not disclosed)

People access the family violence service system but don't reveal their gender, sexuality or intersex status for fear of discrimination or prejudice.

#### 4. System support

(identity disclosed)

People seek to access family violence supports but frequently encounter gaps in service provision, exclusion or lack of informed support due to their gender, sexuality or biological sex characteristics.

- 1. Mainstream services for IPV/FV
- General services (e.g. Centrelink)
- 3. Counsellors and therapists
- 4. Doctors and medical health professionals
- 5. 'Trans specific' health and medical professionals
- 6. Alternative healing therapists
- 7. Workplaces
- 8. Schools
- 9. Queer friendly services and supports
- 10. Spiritual centres and organisations

It's worth noting that some people do not seek or receive help from the system or community. These people experience continued abuse and family violence.

The following pages map what helps and hinders LGBTIQ people who are seeking support as well as the feelings and thoughts people experience throughout their help seeking and recovery journey. The content represents a collection of real, de-identified stories shared generously by LGBTIQ people with lived experience of family violence.

These maps include the aggregated experiences, thoughts, and reflections of people across the 4 contact pathways named previously.

Many experiences detailed here overlap with the experiences of many people experiencing family violence, however these challenges are amplified by the lack of inclusive or informed services for LGBTIQ communities, and/or the structural violence that many LGBTIQ people experience.

The map highlights 3 levels of responses that can help or hinder someone accessing support:

- 1. Service sector
- 2. Community
- 3. Individual.

You'll notice that the majority of barriers are experienced at the system level and people currently find help within the LGBTIQ community.



#### **Journey Map Key**

(next page)

System Response

Community
Response

Individual

**Thoughts** 

**Feelings** 

**Need occurs** 

A gut feeling

**Trusted** external inputs

**Realise that** things aren't right

Searching & evaluating options

Making a decision to do or tell

Is this my fault? Is what I think is happening actually happening? Is this just what being LGBTIQ is like?

Self blame. Denial.

I've fought hard for this. I have to show that my relationship is equal to heteronormative relationships; I have to make it work.

Shame and fear.

Am I worthy of something different? Is this real? Is this what queer relationships are supposed to be like?

Fear of life and living.

Is it actually possible to end this? Is what happened to me enough to get help?

Where are the queer services? I don't see myself in this service...

Will anyone believe me? Do I deserve help? Did I make the wrong decision? Have I made all of this up?

Courage.

Fear and loneliness

Anger.

Gaining more self awareness about yourself, your boundaries, your needs and

who hears you and doesn't shut you down or minimise your experience.

Talking to someone

Support from and conversations with the LGBTIQ community.

Asking for help

Learning about LGBTIQ1 relationships and queer contexts to understand what's 'normal' and what's not.

Queering the definitions and using inclusive language.

Normalisation of violence within LGBTIQ relationships and general disassociation from trying to support or intervene.

Not knowing you deserve better.

> Discussion of violence and understanding of violence is through a binary gendered lens.

Normalisation of violence and a lack of understanding or defining intimate partner

Not having strong support networks or friends outside of relationships or family (who may be the perpetrators of violence).

other options

Continued abuse or Not being out to violence - not family or friends. knowing there are

and a partner)

Experiencing multiple levels or

areas of abuse (e.g. both family

Messages about where or how to seek or access help are not as visible to the LGBTIQ communities

Not seeing people like yourself within the 'system of help' it feels foreign and unsafe.

Services are women focussed which excludes men and others on the gender spectrum.

Active denial of

service access.

Few LGBTIQ-specific Services.

Not being believed. Not being validated. Staff assuming all men are perpetrators or women cannot

be perpetrators

Limited or no safe options to refer to or seek support. No

policy requirements to include LGBTIQ people. Hard to link into a service when

you're not already in a service.

because the system doesn't know where to place them.

Heteronomativity is violent.

The more intersectionality

marginalised they become

someone has the more

Social isolation; losing close support networks

Key **Stages** 

**Telling** someone

Waiting

First encounter with a support

Using a support

**Preparing to** transition out

**Ongoing** recovery and education

This is like a double/triple coming out. I don't trust anyone. I should have tried harder, now I'll be alone.

Stronger.

How do I manage work, trauma, finances, and the situation? Will I ever find new friends and family who respect me?

Depression. Shame.

These people don't understand me, but it's my only option. Am I the perpetrator?

Am I crazy?

Suicidal thoughts

Who represents me and people like me?

Why are they using such a heteronormative way of thinking?

Shame in not knowing how we will be received.

How will my community react?

Will there be backlash? D

This is forever. I'm proud of where I got to, but I'm still angry.

Have the will to live.

Healing, Doubt,

Taking back control of my body and autonomy

People who continually Switchboard, but it's the only and consistently offer one and not always accessible. support.

> Taking control of money and making choices for my wellbeing

Sense of community.

Making new friends and maintaining relationships despite escalations

Surviving with nothing.

Professionals who validate you and your experience.

> One helpful counselor who met me where I was and helped me accept and unpack what happened.

Service alternatives from community - getting a sharehouse with trusted friends.

Practitioners who

minimise violence

against LGBTIQ

people

Calling out unethical behaviour of service providers and professionals.

Therapeutic support to heal accumulated trauma from IPV and systemic abuse.

> Removing self from unsafe space or crisis.

Finding a really good and respectful clinical psychologist who really understands LGBTIQ experiences of violence and trauma

Some queer-friendly services.

Fear that funding won't be

continued or sustained for th

few services that are helpful.

Maintaining community connection and friendship

Support from friends with lived experience who understand the LGBTIQ context.

Knowing that we are at a phenomenally important time in the history of designing future strategies to prevent and minimise the harm from family violence for LGBTIQ people.

Learning from the feminists about how community can help one another in the absence of system

Community education by community for community.

Opportunity to create groups and space for queer

Finding someone better.

Not thinking accessing a service or help is possible

makes you feel alone and misunderstood.

Experiencing more violence from community or a partner after seeking help.

Feeling isolated and going back to a violent situation.

Professional's

and strength'

assumptions that we

are "equal in power

The extra load of being expected to educate professionals about LGBTIQ

Needing to help the system understand me and how to support me as a queer person

Workers with lived experience may be hard to retain because some feel they are not financially compensated enough. Many feel overworked

Having to retell my story

If the experience is negative there is a risk that the individual will disengage. and under resourced. Mainstream services are also

multiple times

struggling — not much room or resource for another cohort. Accepting whatever

Having to educate refuge staff

doesn't discriminate instead of

attending to safety planning for

about how family violence

me and my child.

Community and friends who look like me or who No role models: none I can relate to. burnt out.

Behaviour change programs for perpetrators only exist for men

whorephobia, homophobia. No one to help process the added violence received by

the institution.

Lack of education and recovery options.

Coping with emotional flashbacks

Lack of trans aware

and trans sensitive

counseling.

Having to

see an ex

partner

Same-sex partners are Exposure to additional violence in help-seeking (institutional, structural, socially constructed,

oppression).

The professional therapist did not refer me to a DV specialist experience of family violence service, despite my request.

The process of getting an IVO

Encountering homophobic or disrespectful staff and clients.

Being misgendered

Medical professionals who

use their 'power to play

God' and control access

to hormones or surgery.

Viewing trans masculinity as white, Specialised knowledge around LGBTIQ needs, experiences and risks is low in mainstream

service is available even if not LGBTIQ inclusive

somehow seen as being less dangerous... it puts us and our children at higher risk

Racism, transphobia,