



Lesbian and bi women's experience of emergency management

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Authorship and Acknowledgement

With sincere thanks to the four women who so generously and courageously shared their expertise and experiences. Their aim in participating in the research, like ours, is that emergency services will be delivered in an inclusive way so that the needs of all communities are understood and met.

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Introduction and background

The increasing frequency and cost of disasters in Australia and around the globe is focusing attention on the emergency management sector and its capacity to respond effectively. In 2005, it was reported that one in six people in Australia have an estimated lifetime exposure to natural disaster (McFarlane, 2005). A new *Victorian Preparedness Framework* (Emergency Management Victoria, 2017) explicitly notes that community members will need to be prepared to deal with disasters for at least the first 72 hours, in recognition that, despite the best will, specialised external help will not always be available.

A growing body of scholarship provides evidence that some groups are marginalised and not equally able to participate in the emergency management sector either as a community member, volunteer or employee. The focus of this paper is the exclusion of people with diverse gender and sexual identities. Leading researchers into LGBTI communities and emergency management surmise that:

Our sense is that the absence of specific LGBTI needs from emergency management plans results more from inadvertent omission or occlusion rather than specific exclusion or discrimination or from a belief that LGBTI populations are undeserving of equal treatment. (Dominey-Howes et al., 2016, p. 8)

Victoria's Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework: Respect and Inclusion for All (Emergency Management Victoria, 2016) leads the way in its specific inclusion of gender and sexual orientation amongst other dimensions of diversity. It aims to ensure that all Victorians feel 'welcome and supported to participate in planning for, responding to and recovering from emergencies' (p. 16).

In Australia, about 10% of the population have diverse sexual or gender identities. With 60% of young LGBTI people suffering homophobic verbal abuse and 20% physical abuse, about half hide their sexual or gender identity through fear (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). It appears that the emergency management sector reflects this homophobia.

This paper reports findings from an exploratory, qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with four lesbian or bi women, funded by the Gender and Disaster Pod.¹ The aim of the study is to better understand the needs of LGBTI communities in emergencies, specifically by:

- (1) identifying the experiences of LGBTI people as 'clients' in an emergency, and

¹ A separate research report presents the findings from the two online surveys commissioned by Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC).

- (2) Identifying the LGBTI-inclusiveness of emergency management practices and policies.

The ultimate aim of this paper is to influence those in the emergency management sector to improve LGBTI-inclusion, first by identifying the ways in which existing practices are harmful to LGBTI people, to organisations within the sector, and to the communities they serve. An important dimension of the problem to be addressed is captured by one of the participants:

How do I stay in this little box that they want me to stay in so that nobody else feels offended by me? (Gabriel)

This has to change.

Methodology

Ethics approval was obtained from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. Recruitment for the interviews took place from 19 January to 3 February 2017. A snowball approach was taken to engage with LGBTI people who had experience of emergency management. Ethics approval allowed for potential participants to be invited by GLHV, the Women's Health Services and others in the emergency management sector. Participants were invited to contact the research team to arrange an interview at a time and place of their choosing. They were then emailed the explanatory statement and consent form.

In research involving rural areas and small target population such as LGBTI communities, it is often difficult to achieve confidentiality. The explanatory statement therefore included the following paragraph, under Risks:

Potential participants may see risk in possible repercussions from this identification as LGBTI or a person of diverse gender and sexual identity. Some LGBTI people may be reluctant to participate in the research because they may feel it compromises their privacy through identification both in personal interviews and in completing Survey Monkey questionnaires.

Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. The four interviews were conducted between 30 January to 6 February 2017. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer confirmed that participants had read and understood the forms; asked if they had further questions; and confirmed that the consent forms had been signed before commencement of the interviews. Participants were reminded that they had the right to stop the interview at any time or to refuse to answer any particular question. They were advised of their right to withdraw from the project at any point up until the report was released.

The researcher digitally taped the interviews which were then transcribed (with consent). Recordings were deleted once transcriptions were complete. Questions were semi-structured and open, allowing the interviewee to direct the interview. The topic was the experience of LGBTI people in emergency or disaster situations as it relates to the provision of services and support from those in the emergency management sector. The interviews were approximately 60 minutes long. The transcriptions were returned to the women for their amendment and/or approval. All four women lived in Victoria and spoke about their experiences in this state. Participants were reimbursed \$100 for their costs in attending the individual in-depth interview in recognition of their out of pocket expenses.

Thematic analysis was used following Glaser & Strauss' Grounded Theory (1967) assisted by NVivo V.11 Qualitative Data Analysis software package. The coding unit was the sentence, and the purpose was to ascribe meaning. The result was a series of hierarchical inter-related categories and sub-categories allowing interpretation. A second researcher coded the interviews to enhance validity.

Literature review

The following is taken from the Gender and Emergency Management Literature Review:
<http://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/national-gem-guidelines/>

There is limited research on sexual and gender minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex – or LGBTI – people) in the context of disaster and emergency management. What exists illustrates the vulnerabilities and needs, as well as the resilience, of LGBTI people. Although reflective of different 'laws, politics and social mores' in different contexts, LGBTI people nevertheless often face marginalisation and discrimination in current-day Australia (Flood & Hamilton, 2007, cited in Gorman-Murray et al., 2016a, p. 2). Emergency management policy neglect of LGBTI people (Dominey-Howes et al., 2016), along with the omission of LGBTI experiences and needs from mainstream media reporting on disaster impacts (McKinnon, 2016; McKinnon et al., 2016a) exacerbates this.

A study of disasters in various settings indicates that the impact of disaster "unmakes" LGBTI home and belonging leading to 'queer domicile' (Gorman-Murray et al., 2014a, p. 238). Disaster impacts are heightened for LGBTI people, as the destruction of home is the destruction of the safe place away from judgement (McKinnon et al., 2016b). The usual procedures to secure residences and rehouse those affected by disaster are accompanied by additional privacy concerns and risk or experience of discrimination. The loss of community and infrastructure places a much heavier burden on people who may be marginalised and excluded in the everyday. The space of evacuation centres, for example, may be experienced as a space of risk by same-sex couples who fear homophobic responses from personnel or other evacuees (Gorman-Murray et al., 2014a, 2016a). The lack of privacy in these centres, particularly in bathroom facilities divided only into a male/female binary, is often highly problematic for transgender individuals (Gorman-Murray et al., 2014b). Research participants reported exacerbated anxiety after the 2011 Queensland floods resulting from having to hide their sexual or gender identity from emergency management workers and volunteers, or stay with people who were not accepting of them (Gorman-Murray et al., 2016a, 2016b).

In New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the official definition of 'family' precluded same-sex couples, leading to lower levels of access to support and to some couples being separated and settled in different cities (Caldwell, 2006; Leap et al., 2007 cited in Dominey-Howes et al., 2014). Priority to 'families' defined as heterosexual couples with children resulted in a concentration of recovery resources towards middle-class suburbs, and a diminished focus on neighbourhoods more likely to house marginal groups, LGBTI people, and especially areas with congregations of lesbians, queer women and LGBTI people of colour, who lacked middle-class cultural capital and financial resources (Richards, 2010; D'Ooge, 2008 cited in Dominey-Howes, et al. 2014)

Natural disasters are asserted by some in extreme religious groups to be caused by “sinners”. These groups define homosexuality and non-normative gender identity as sinful, and place blame for the disaster on LGBTI people, particularly gay men: in this view it is punishment from God (Richards, 2010; Dominey-Howes et al., 2014; Gorman-Murray et al., 2016a). Abuse and intimidation can accompany such absurd allegations as noted by a research participant after the 2011 Queensland floods who remembered being told often that the behaviour of gay people had brought this disaster upon the town (Gorman-Murray et al., 2016a). Such religious-based perspectives undermine the rights of LGBTI people to equitable access to disaster, recovery and reconstruction assistance, particularly as state governments may – and have – outsourced these services to faith-based Christian organisations that have some exemptions from anti-discrimination protections under Commonwealth and State laws (Dominey-Howes et al., 2016).

The research that does exist on LGBTI communities and disaster confirms that resilience developed over a lifetime of discrimination and marginalisation offers a model for the broader community in networking and support (Gorman-Murray et al., 2016a, 2016b; McKinnon et al., 2016b). Dominey-Howes et al. (2016) recommend that representatives of LGBTI organisations be included in emergency management consultations, noting that this fits with the ethos of the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience. It is important to acknowledge the diversity within LGBTI populations and the way differences in class, race, ethnicity, etc. (or intersectionality) affect experiences and consequences of disaster (Dominey-Howes et al., 2014; Gorman-Murray et al., 2014b, 2016b; McKinnon et al., 2016b). As stated in the recently developed National Principles for Disaster Recovery, understanding the context of specific communities and the associated risks is important in acknowledging existing capacity and providing support those who are vulnerable (CDSMAC, 2016). It is clear that more research is needed to fill the gap in knowledge, policy and practice on sexual and gender minorities in the context of emergency management (Dominey-Howes et al., 2014).

Findings

The findings are organised under key categories of ‘Language and assumptions’, ‘Discrimination and consequences’, ‘Sector acknowledgement of LGBTI communities’, ‘The role of faith-based organisations’ and ‘Ways forward’.

The lesbian and bi women interviewed for this research about LGBTI people and emergency management described the ways in which they did not have the same rights as those in heterosexual couples. They spoke of extra effort involved in accessing or being involved in emergency management. In the everyday, the context for many LGBTI people is one of caution about what level of disclosure will be safe. In this research, Stevie² spoke of outright discrimination, threat and violence over most of her life, the effect of which is to live carefully and privately.

When you’ve had a long period of feeling threatened, and you’ve lived with some form of threat all of your life, that’s different to the level of threat most people in the community experience. I don’t know quite what it’s like these days because we so rarely walk anywhere together but, certainly through my teens and 20s and 30s and

² Not her real name. Pseudonyms used throughout.

40s you couldn't sit and have a conversation somewhere without abuse if you were two women on your own. It was pretty extreme. (Stevie)

Emergency and disaster contexts exacerbate discrimination at every stage. The table below indicates that all except one of the key issues identified in the literature on emergencies and LGBTI communities were also found in the data from the four interviews conducted for this research:

Key issues identified in the literature on EM & LGBTI communities ³	Examples referred to by Interviewees
Loss of private (safe) space	✓
Risk of violence or harassment at community shelters/ at time of disaster	✓
Discrimination	✓
LGBTI people accused of causing disasters	
Discrimination from support services/ emergency service organisations	✓
Discrimination from faith-based organisations	✓
Marginalisation or exclusion	✓
Verbal abuse	✓
Lack of recognition of couple or family status	✓
Challenges for those in transition - medication	✓
LGBTI people 'invisible' in emergency management – 'same needs'	✓
Negative attention in mainstream media and politics	Experienced in this project through responses to the emergency management Commissioner's tweet and in subsequent coverage in <i>The Australian</i> – particularly the comments that followed.

The following data is presented through the women's voices and allows insight into the ways discrimination is enacted, and the consequences of homophobia in the context of emergency management.

Language and assumptions

The central importance of relationships and self-identity is denied when assumptions are made that LGBTI people are part of the normative heterosexual culture. A narrow and dated world view denies the reality of people with diverse sexual and gender identities and limits their equal participation in society. LGBTI people are reminded that they are not part of 'mainstream' or privileged society over and over:

³ Most of the Australian literature has been conducted by Dale Dominey-Howes, Andrew Gorman-Murray and Scott MacKinnon. See reference list.

They're saying that you're not part of the normal way things are. And when you get that from not just CFA but then from a school, and from the childcare, and then from the council, when you get it everywhere it's just another place that is doing that to you and all those experiences together equal isolation. (Jane)

Whether deliberate or inadvertent, assumptions about heterosexuality and normative family structures can cause offence. More germane, it can limit the life choices of LGBTI people, limiting movement and excluding LGBTI people from events, training, careers and community life.

[The CFA will be at the library or] at the farmer's market and they're there to engage the community and ask people, "Have you made a bushfire plan" ... and twice they have been very friendly ... and we'd have good conversations and then they would say something along the lines of, "What about your husband, where is he going to be when this stuff is happening? Have you thought about him?" and I don't have a husband, I've got a partner who's a female. I think on one of those situations I corrected them and the other one I just let it keep going. (Jane)

The effect may be to restrict willingness to provide accurate information, instead offering the expected references to 'my husband':

Sometimes it's easier to just go "my husband" just so that I keep getting a smooth service from them without having to stop and have a whole disclosure of sexuality in the middle of a conversation about a bushfire plan, these have nothing to do with each other. (Jane)

In a more formal version of this, Stevie was unable to obtain counselling services because the model they were based on was that of a husband/wife family. The only way she could access the service was by agreeing to bend the truth of her relationship in paperwork and in any follow up surveys.

[The service provider] basically had to tell a few porky pies to his bosses to count us as being a couple. Because we weren't, in inverted commas, "a family". (Stevie)

Unintended hurtful remarks, lack of understanding, and assumptions that everyone is in a heterosexual relationship results in isolation. While accepted that people are mostly 'not trying to be unpleasant' as it can be unconscious and a thoughtless use of words, one participant points out that in a disaster context, 'it can become a much bigger issue because all sorts of things come to keep adding to pressure or to bad experiences':

I think so many people, if they've never been in the situation of being abused, have no insight whatsoever into what it's like for other people. (Stevie)

The discrimination observed by the women in this research traverses unintended and 'casual' homophobia to overt hostility:

*I guess it's been that closed group, so we're all men, we're all white and we're all straight so we can bag women ... and we can bag gay people ... language like f*** homos and faggots, so really revolting language to describe people who are gay is*

just said like, "I'm not even noticing that that's offensive because it's not offensive to me". (Gabriel)

The depth of hostility is apparent in one participant's observation:

[My partner] was in the Post Office picking up the mail and was told that [an acquaintance] had died of cancer. We knew he was having treatment but we hadn't seen him for ages. And one of the other local blokes said, "He was a only a bloody poofter anyway". (Stevie)

Disclosure and consequences

Exclusionary language and assumptions have real-life consequences for LGBTI people, not least in emergencies or disasters. Risk reduction involves community education and preparation of household fire plans. Life experience of rejection or judgement or even others' reaction to disclosure has created barriers for many LGBTI people – barriers that may prevent their engagement with emergency management services. Jane related the ongoing decision-making about whether to 'come out' to service providers and community members:

I always have to decide whether to come out or not, and it's not about - people always think it's about shame or something, that I feel ashamed because I don't want to tell them. But it's just, it's more about just not feeling like having the reaction ... I feel like I'm assisting them to overcome whatever is going on for them – and they're supposed to be providing me a service. (Jane)

Although two of the women were able to personally keep at bay the disempowerment the system and society impose on marginalised groups, it demands ongoing strength and insight, and not everyone is in a position to do this:

[If it comes to] me ringing SES or getting assistance from CFA or police there's a lot of ways in the world in which I feel empowered and I have lots of privileges and I feel comfortable advocating to those particular organisations to assist me, but that will not be the experiences of lots and lots of GLBTI people including folks within my own community. (Jane)

Two of the women in this sample were involved in the Black Saturday fires – each in a different part of the affected region. Both spoke of themselves and their partners becoming much more isolated after the fires. The initial cohesion immediately following the disaster had consequences for the privacy of same-sex couples:

People knew I was gay but afterwards because everybody was together - community dining, CFA - the whole community, they all knew by then. (Jesse)

This is especially vital in small towns where anonymity is impossible and where heterosexuality is assumed.

Certainly, in areas like this there isn't a gay community. People don't want to be seen together, in case ... Here in a small community, you feel that you can't say anything. You do feel that you are muzzled in your response. (Stevie)

In this, as a small community, you don't have the luxury of never seeing these people again. (Jane)

The lack of privacy begins with evacuation and relief centres:

My idea of a recovery centre is that there's all these families and they're all trying to find a spot to put their head down at the end of the day with their family and that would be a harder space for queer families to be in. (Jane)

Stevie described the kind of events that were part of community recovery after the fires, which were characterised by a focus on heterosexual couples and nuclear families:

*Almost all of the fire-funded events were things like dances. A gay couple do not go to a public dance. You've got people who are all liquored up dancing. We just said, "We're not going to be able to enjoy it, we're going to be spending our whole time worried. We're certainly not going to participate in any dancing".
[Tell me what it is that you'd be worried about.]
Verbal abuse. Best scenario. (Stevie)*

For one participant, the effect of depression and/or a hostile community led to taking refuge in privacy and isolation:

There's probably about three people I speak to up here and that's it. (Jesse)

Sector acknowledgement of LGBTI people

"We treat everyone the same"

One participant had many years' experience in an emergency management role. Her reflections were of a mono-cultural and heterosexual emergency service organisation, confident in its ability to treat everyone the same, believing this approach to be fair. Yet she stated, 'You know they're not', suggesting it is in their 'blind spot' with no realisation of the effect of 'same treatment'. Another participant's comment on the belief amongst emergency management personnel that they treat everyone fairly was, 'I'm sure that's what they'd like to think'. She continued:

I think if anybody says that they treat everybody the same, that has to be untrue because the elderly, the drunks, the abusive and so on will all require a different approach. It's a bit disingenuous, I suppose they're trying to defend themselves. (Stevie)

A third participant said:

"Everything is fine, we can't see anything, everything is great, close your eyes" ... That is not true that everybody gets treated equally on a truck. It may be in some CFA stations. (Jesse)

Perceived differences – between those comfortable within the emergency management cultural norm many people with diverse gender and sexual identities – are a subject of heightened interest and judgement:

20 years of recruitment [and a staff of 2,000], there's been two men who've been openly gay in the recruit course. Everybody knows about it. It becomes this big thing. (Gabriel)

For those who do not fit the norm of male and heterosexual, judgements on issues of sexuality are made and levels of disclosure of private life have implications for acceptance:

So if I'm straight what does that mean for them, if I'm not married what does that mean for them, if I'm gay what does that mean? (Gabriel)

The same concern of how she could expect to be judged and treated was expressed by Jane after attending a volunteer fire fighter training course:

Me, who feels quite empowered in the world in so many ways, even I don't feel completely confident that I can go to them for the [emergency management] support that they say that they provide. (Jane)

Masculinity

The particular construction of masculinity for many men involved in emergency services is towards the extreme end of hegemonic (ideal) masculinity. The concept of physical strength as a measure of manhood was described as 'the holy grail' of fire-fighters. Passing the test of bench pressing is held up as essential to entry into fire-fighting. Anything less is referred to as 'lowering the bar', 'watering down standards', 'endangering the community' and 'risking lives'. Yet its critical importance to being a fire fighter is called into question because once in the ranks, the test is not repeated annually, or even after a decade.

It's completely irrelevant to the job. That's like, "Well we're men and that's what men do, so that's important for fire fighting ... if you can't bench press '200 kilograms' then you're not a good firefighter" ... [But] if you need it to get in, why don't you need it to be here 10 years later or 20 years later? (Gabriel)

The explanation for clinging on to the illusion of a once-off strength test may be that the iconic image of the hyper masculine fire fighter is called into question if women and gay men are capable of fulfilling the role:

Women can do exactly what the men can do and that was proven. I was up there doing exactly what the guys were doing. I was out there getting dirty and wet and nearly dying. (Jesse)

If you're gay you're somehow not manly and the thing of fireman being the archetype of masculinity, like the men who have gone, "I put on a fire helmet so that makes me a man". Then if they see a gay man wearing the helmet it's like "well what does that make me?" (Gabriel)

Homophobia amongst emergency management personnel appears to lead to emergency management procedures that are quite different. In attending an incident, Gabriel identified two ways different treatment emerged:

My officer wouldn't let me go in, he said "I want you to stay out here" because he thought I'd be so traumatised by a gay [venue].

Another one of the officers was bagging his gear in an asbestos bag after ... and he was 'Virkonning' - the stuff that we do if we have a blood spill. So there'd been no blood spill ... there's no biohazard, it was just in a gay [venue] where men are having sex. So he bagged and tagged his gear to take it for decontamination and he said to his crew he was worried about them "catching gays".

Celebration of men's freedom and ability to have sex with many women fits into a particular construction of masculinity, and appears entrenched in sections of the emergency management sector. Examples were given of older men asking younger men about their sexual exploits on the weekend, and of covering for colleagues having affairs if their wives or partners phoned for them. Amongst the few young women recruits each year are some young women considered 'fresh meat' by some fire-fighters, with an expectation that they will be compliant:

[... As a colleague] if I come in as single and straight, so not married, so not owned by somebody else and straight then I'm fair game and my job is to make them feel more masculine. (Gabriel)

Gabriel reflected on the apparent inevitability of sexual harassment in an organisational culture that did not challenge male privilege, and noted that being bisexual offered some protection. As a woman with a female partner, predatory men would assume this was the reason for any rejection, and there would be an opportunity to join in with the sexist 'camaraderie':

You don't challenge their masculinity because you're gay – that's the only reason you're not having sex with them ... The people with the power say "this is how it is" and the people without the power know they have no power ... I accepted that I would get sexually harassed and I accepted that the way to fit in is to sexually objectify women. (Gabriel)

Three participants wondered if being accepted into this hyper masculine culture may be worse for gay men than for lesbians or bisexual women.

I've known a lot of people living in the country or in the area I'm from who think "lesbians are alright, they're okay" and I suspect it has something to do with pornography culture ... but two gay men? That's disgusting and horrible and they better not come near me or else. (Jane)

I've had five different men disclose to me about their not being 100% hetero and the absolute terror about if anybody in the job knew. (Gabriel)

One participant observed some colleagues shifting in awareness after having sons come out. Their willingness to publicly acknowledge how homophobic they had been, and to identify the extant homophobia of the organisation is an important shift.

Conforming

Two of the four participants had previously been employed or volunteered as fire fighters and spoke in the highest terms of what this meant to them. The desire to help others in this way pushed them to find strategies of surviving in a system that they found discriminated against them. The same finding emerged in relation to women in our recent study for DELWP

on barriers to women in fire and emergency leadership roles (Parkinson, Duncan & Hedger, 2015).

I was told, "Just stay away from those guys because they're homophobic" and at the time I'm like, "Well it's after the fires, I just want to keep going on fire fighting because I love it. It's my passion" ... It's being able to save people and protect property and know that you've made a difference ... it's the most amazing feeling the world. (Jesse)

To be able to stay a fire fighter, the two women spoke of strategies that included fitting in with a male-centred culture. The cost of continuing in a job they loved was to conform to a prescribed culture unwilling to accept others outside this norm:

I really looked at the landscape, so you drink like a fish, you swear like a trooper and you sexually objectify women. Alright, got it, I'll do that and I did it ... It was because I got a laugh, because it got me included, because it got like, "Oh you're just one of the boys". (Gabriel)

Assessments of women's ability as a fire fighter seemed to align closely with fit of personality and values. One participant described a binary of 'You're with us or you're against us' as the dominant message in the emergency management sector, with penalties for those who did not fit in. She described being 'one of the boys' as the height of compliment – when she was younger. However, the years wore down her willingness to conform. Strategies to survive by those outside the male norm culture traversed 'absolutely playing the game' to laying low and 'hiding in the middle of the pack'. Either way, penalties existed in having to deny skills and leadership ambition, and repress authentic self-expression. Gabriel captured the loss to the organisation, saying, 'All these wonderful things about people are just checked at the door'. Although highly successful at being seen as 'one of us', Gabriel resented the cost to her sense of self and who she was allowed to be in order to do a job she loved.

I remember I tried, I watched some football show and repeated what one of the commentators had said one day and I got a really good response. People were so excited about "I can connect with you now" and I was like "I don't want to live a lie"... if you're not [included] then you're at the other end of the station doing your study or whatever. And they're like, "Oh why don't you go off and do your knitting", whatever, all that sort of degrading kind of stuff as well. Like, "if you're not like us then you must be something that we would just say was bad". (Gabriel)

Another found the same requirement to be part of a crew of fitting in and not speaking out about discrimination:

You've just got to shut up and take it ... That's what you have to do if you want to stay in an organisation like that ... when you love something that much and you get treated like that for being a woman and for being gay then it's really horrible. It made me suicidal. (Jesse)

The penalty for Jesse is clear. When asked if she is still a fire fighter, she replied:

No. I live in a place where the two [emergency organisations] are bullies and homophobes ... I don't want to go to another place and be confronted with

something like that again. I can't mentally do that ... I've tried it four times and I've copped it each time. (Jesse)

Challenging culture?

A power dynamic exists between community members/property owners and those in emergency management. Rural areas are characterised by small communities and lack of anonymity. It is both a disadvantage and a benefit that 'everyone knows everyone'. Living in a fire or flood-prone area means potentially having to call emergency services and rely on the community members – usually acquaintances – who run or are involved in this service. Freedom to criticise such emergency service organisations for homophobia necessarily comes second to ensuring safety for the home and family. This has the effect of curbing standing up for equal treatment. For Jane, the impossibility of changing the entrenched hegemonic male culture was evident:

[The organisation] felt too deep for me to effectively be able to challenge or change and I thought my work is not going to be able to be done, I'm out of here. (Jane)

All four participants spoke of a bullying culture going unchallenged. Amongst peers, people appear to tolerate discriminatory comments and behaviours believing there is nothing they can do. In the absence of past unequivocal strong leadership on diversity and inclusion, the hegemonic male culture was allowed to dominate.⁴ Given the power imbalance, the cost to marginalised individuals of challenging culture was too high:

Maybe somebody who had some more insight, some more experience and more power in the system when I just joined should have been doing something about challenging that. (Gabriel)

One participant told of a volunteer training session where she did not feel welcome. Within the first three hours, there was a violent, slow motion video of a boxing match and sexist and gay jokes encouraged by the three leaders present all laughing.

I thought, "That's not an okay thing to say" and when he said that, everybody laughed or most people laughed, it felt like the room was laughing. (Jane)

Jane eloquently spoke of why jokes about people from marginalised communities are not acceptable and the way it fuels violence and isolation:

I can imagine him just going, "Oh my God, this person just does not get a joke" and just having a real lack of understanding of how jokes like that contribute to the marginalisation of my family, contribute to the violence that happens to my communities. When you say jokes like that, even if you yourself are not someone who is perpetrating violent acts towards gay people, there might be someone in the room who is – someone who has perpetrated violent acts against gay people – and

⁴ Current senior leadership in Victoria is demonstrating the leadership necessary to begin culture change. See Emergency Management Victoria. (2016). The Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework: Respect and inclusion for all. Melbourne: EMV. Retrieved from <http://files.em.vic.gov.au/EMV-web/Emergency-Management-Diversity-and-Inclusion-Framework.pdf>.

when you make a joke like that it just reinforces to them that, "Okay, the thing that I did is actually not that big of a deal, it's okay and maybe it's not that a big of a deal if I ever did it again as well". There's a real lack of understanding about that. (Jane)

Discrimination

Two participants recounted instances where they personally had been discriminated against because of their non-conformity with the dominant culture. For Jesse, this took a number of forms. She said the bullying and discrimination started after the fires:

*I didn't have anything **during** the fires. Got on a fire truck and did what I had to do. I felt safe with the people I was with, them knowing I was gay. **After** was probably when it all hit the fan. There was a lot of bullying. (Jesse)*

Despite being told she was 'one of the best fire fighters on the truck on the day' and that 'it would be a pleasure to work with you again', Jesse was pushed out. In other examples of discrimination experienced by Jesse, she had to 'fight' to be awarded her five-year certificate of service to the CFA. She put this down to being a 'female that has a voice – and I'm gay'. She also missed out on receiving a medal for her service on Black Saturday until more than five years later. She was not part of the community ceremony where others were awarded their medals.

Everybody got their medal, they didn't even tell me about it... everybody got theirs, they went on stage and the whole community was there ... If I didn't see that [sign] I wouldn't have known. (Jess)

Homophobia was also experienced by Stevie and her partner. She told of a social occasion for an emergency organisation's volunteers and their family members:

We said, "Oh that would be nice, we'll put our toe in the water with socialising". A little bus brought us up in front of the gate and there was this terrible atmosphere on the bus and we thought, "Perhaps someone has had an argument". So anyway, nobody spoke to us. We got on, we went to the do and the do went alright then we were part of the way back and some of them had had a lot to drink. So there were about 12 to 14 of us on the bus and [my partner] and I were on separate seats near the front and a single chap was sitting just ahead of us, and the next thing this very loud abusive remark came out about sitting up the front with queers or something. So none of the three of us responded. So the next thing, a much louder shout with the same remark was sent forward and in normal circumstances, me in particular, I would have tackled them but they were liquored up. [My partner's] supposed colleagues didn't say a word, and we thought, they're so drunk it wouldn't be safe to follow-up on the abuse. (Stevie)

Stevie was later informed that the person making the homophobic remark was senior within a key emergency service organisation. Further discrimination followed this incident when Stevie's partner sent a letter outlining what had happened.

Amazingly, considering we were right at the front of the bus, it had to be shouted over all those people, none of those people heard those remarks at all. Isn't that amazing? So as [my partner] rightly said, "These are people that I'm going out with

into the bush, on my own, in quite hazardous situations sometimes” ... And said, “I don’t trust them anymore”. (Stevie)

Jesse also questioned her safety within an organisation where homophobia was evident.

After a while I'm like "if I got on a truck with these guys would I be safe? Will they protect me if they don't like me because I'm gay?" (Jesse)

The role of faith based organisations

Faith-based organisations play an important role in emergency management at every stage. In particular, these organisations are central in the recovery stage, often winning government contracts to undertake this role.

There is no question that many individuals who work under the banner of faith-based organisations work in an inclusive way. However, organisational advocacy by churches against equal marriage, for example, creates an immediate barrier for some LGBTI people. Past experiences of rejection by religious staff and people working for faith-based organisations were reported by participants in this study. Such experiences led to a reluctance to approach these same organisations for help at a time of particular vulnerability. A lifetime of being judged as sinful and in need of correction means some LGBTI people will not look to faith-based services in times of emergency. It appears that others would use the services but point to the unease this could cause:

I would feel deeply uncomfortable if I had to be looked after by some sort of religious based organisation at a time that I was experiencing a crisis. That would be extremely troubling for me ... an organisation [that] has been unkind ... or who advocates for things that would make my life worse, that's a very uncomfortable and unfair situation to put me in. Would I use those services? Of course I would if I was in crisis, I would have to wouldn't I? (Jane)

Three participants remembered alienating experiences:

I've had ministers of churches who I've been forced to go to counselling with tell me that a lesbian lifestyle is not an okay lifestyle, that I need to follow closer in the teachings of Jesus to find my path towards heterosexuality. (Jane)

I know the [name of organisation removed] are homophobic and I don't agree with having them work for anyone. (Jesse)

We have had so many bad experiences with church and religions overall that having anything to do with them at all is a major stress. Even if nothing actually seems to be bad in the aid deliverance, for many of us our past and current experiences and media reporting of spokespeople's comments ... mean that we avoid all contacts with such groups, even when faced with a major crisis. (Stevie)

Ways forward

All four participants agreed to be interviewed in order to contribute to change. All had tried to draw attention to the unfairness they had witnessed and experienced, with no satisfaction that they had even been heard. For one, the struggle lasted two years, for another, it has

characterised the past two decades. They spoke of trying to address the issues in various ways: in person, emailing and formally writing letters of complaint. There was no real response. Two key emergency service organisations did not respond. One participant suggested why:

They would have women come and drop out. They would have LGBTI people come and drop out. And very few of them would articulate for them the reasons. So I think an email like this could have been the first one they ever received. I don't think they get a lot of emails like that. So they just didn't know how to respond. (Jane)

Nothing was done until [a community leader] just couldn't handle seeing me in the way I was, and my partner was having trouble ... we just had to fight for the recognition of "I'm gay and I'm going through this", or "I'm a woman and I'm going through this". It's time to do something about it. (Jesse)

The first step in changing to an inclusive and diverse culture is raising awareness of the ways in which the existing hegemonic male cultures that characterise emergency service organisations are damaging and not reflective of the communities they serve. Training can be an exercise in 'ticking off' or it can be a genuine organisation-wide initiative, implemented with support, role-modelling and bystander interventions from senior leaders and middle management. One participant suggested evaluation of training include post training follow-up with organisation-wide surveys on inclusion and diversity repeated and reported regularly to allow a longitudinal assessment of progress. Beyond addressing organisational culture within emergency service organisations, the training could also encompass how inclusive service provision is:

It's about how comfortable that [emergency service organisations] make their own community feel in seeking them for support ... they have to address those things, those are major barriers ... I wonder about how [young people who are trans] would go in a recovery sort of situation asking for assistance, from one of these blokey blokes, to store their medication. (Jane)

Mandatory courses [that] everybody has got to go to about equality ... a couple of times a year and every firefighter on this planet or in Victoria has to do as part of their courses, induction and then a refresher later in the year. For being a woman and being a lesbian/gay/transgender, the whole lot. (Jesse)

The centrality of emergency services and the high regard Australians have historically had for fire-fighters and other professionals involved in emergency management elevate the urgent need to diversity internally as well as understand the diverse nature of the society they serve.

Discussion

Members of the LGBTI community continue to face stigma that sometimes manifests itself in insult, offence, discrimination or violence. Assumptions of heterosexuality and family structures that reflect a heterosexual couple family with children deny LGBTI people the freedom of authentic self-expression, and equal recognition of relationships. The need to always 'come out' leaves LGBTI people open to judgement and responsible for handling others' reaction. Recent reports note high rates of mental health problems among LGBT

Australians linked to systemic discrimination (Leonard, Lyons, Bariola, 2015) and higher rates of suicide in same-sex attracted people resulting from the cumulative harm of a lifetime of 'casual' everyday discrimination and harassment (Rosenstreich, 2013).

The participants in this research told of discrimination that went beyond casual or unintended offence, to exclusion and bullying. They reported not being allowed to take part equally in community celebrations and events; being verbally abused; being fearful of violence and harassment; and being discriminated against by organisations providing services after disaster.

The restricted freedoms that follow such marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination have resulted for two of the participants in not being able to pursue or continue a career in fire-fighting. For both, this is a profound loss. It is equally a loss for the organisations, and for the community served. The lack of diversity within emergency service organisations, particularly the fire-fighting branches, increases the likelihood that homophobia would be more prevalent. The culture is known to be 'blokey', or 'an old boys network' dominated by a particularly form of Australian masculinity (Enarson & Pease, 2016; Parkinson, et al., 2015; Tyler, Fairbrother & Phillips, 2012; Whittaker, Eriksen & Haynes, 2015; Zara, Parkinson, Duncan & Joyce, 2016). Diminutive or insulting terms used by emergency management personnel to refer to LGBTI people, or jokes at their expense reinforce the 'us' and 'them' world view that keeps fire-fighting emergency service organisations predominantly and visibly white, male and straight.

The justification of 'We treat everyone the same' is misguided. As GLHV@arcshs writes:

"Treating everybody the same" usually means that all people are treated as heterosexual and this can be alienating to GLBT people in all sorts of ways. Research shows that not all people are the same. GLBTI people have different life experiences and health needs from their heterosexual peers." (Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria, n.d.)

Further, 'same treatment' is bad practice when it results in people refusing services they're entitled to for fear of discriminatory treatment. As explained by participants in this research, 'same treatment' when administered with judgement and homophobia is *different* treatment. Clearly, emergency management cannot 'treat everyone the same'. For example, people with physical disabilities or very old or very young people are treated differently and it is important that this be the case.

You hear it all the time, "Nobody cares if it's a woman or a man or someone who's green, purple or orange" and it's like, "Well OK, you're dismissing anybody's concern about any of those things because that lets you stay with white men do it fine, we don't need to change that at all". (Gabriel)

LGBTI people have suffered immeasurably in historically recent times. In Victoria, the death penalty could apply to male homosexuality until 1949, and it was not until 1980 that it was removed as a crime (Human Rights Law Centre, 2014). Discrimination against lesbians was evident with experiences of forced removal of children, eviction from homes and communities and forced treatments to 'cure' them (Barrett, Whyte, Leonard, Comfort, 2014).

The participants suggested that LGBTI people may forgo help rather than try to access help from faith-based organisations, particularly in the aftermath of disasters when most vulnerable. This echoes research from NSW (Dominey-Howes, et al., 2016) and the Australian Human Rights Commission's (2015) concern that LGBTI people are reluctant to approach faith-based organisations for support services through fear of discrimination (see also (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014; Dominey-Howes et al., 2016; Gorman-Murray et al., 2016b; Human Rights Law Centre, 2014; Leonard et al., 2015). Currently, recovery services may be outsourced to organisations that have applied for, and received, exemptions under Section 37 of the *Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (SDA) and are therefore able to discriminate against LGBTI people (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015). It is clear that reforms to anti-discrimination legislation are called for in regard to disaster recovery services. Government has a duty to ensure citizens have access to taxpayer services. It would be possible for the federal government to remove this exemption as it did in relation to provision of aged care services to LGBTI people (Dominey-Howes et al, 2016, p. 3). This would be an important step in ensuring those delivering services as part of faith-based organisations do so without discrimination.

Training is another strategy to challenge assumptions and educate about equal rights to participation in emergency services. The ubiquity and easy acceptance of heterosexual individuals, relationships and family structures is one dimension of privilege proffered to some in our society. As with other dimensions of privilege, such as being male, or being white, for example, those with privilege mostly do not recognise it. A recent campaign had the slogan: 'I don't mind if you're straight, just don't flaunt it.' In this research, Jane said, "I think I'll tell my children that I will love them even if they turn out straight". Both statements invert the world view and this inversion of privilege can be a challenge to those so used to it that recognising the equal rights of others is foreign. The homophobia that is evident in the emergency management sector can be addressed with education for emergency management sector personnel. Diversification within the emergency service organisations themselves to reflect the communities they serve is a necessary first step.

Conclusion

When bullying and discrimination go unchallenged by those at leadership level, it draws those newer and less powerful into complicity with the damaging and excluding culture. Leaders set the standard of behaviour and lead by example. They have the rank, privilege and responsibility to protect and mentor those in their charge. Abrogation of this duty leaves those less powerful open to hurt and humiliation, and living without equal access to emergency services, volunteering and employment. Importantly, Victoria's new *Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework: Respect and Inclusion for All*, states that 'all members of the community expect and are entitled to have the same access to services' (Emergency Management Victoria, 2016, p. 6). The Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner states, 'If we want change one of the best things we can do is have a diverse workforce' (p. 12). With unequivocal senior leadership on LGBTI inclusion, increased awareness at every level through training, and a diversified professional and volunteer workforce, equal access to disaster and emergency services for those of diverse sexual and gender identities will be possible. There is an urgent need for the emergency management sector to address inequity based on gender and sexual identity. The benefits extend to the organisations, as a diversified workforce increases capability and the result is a safer, more cohesive community.

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