



**SUPPORTING YOUR EMPLOYEES  
AFFECTED BY THE DEBATE ON  
MARRIAGE EQUALITY**

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diversity®



#### Note

The majority of information released as at September 2016 indicates that the plebiscite for marriage equality question will address same-sex marriage, and details of the Government's proposed changes to the Marriage Act have not yet been released. Pride in Diversity acknowledges that this may be exclusive of many transgender people, including non-binary gender identities, and intersex people.

Minimal research evidence exists on the impacts of marriage equality and denial on transgender and intersex people. More work must be done to include transgender and intersex people in this debate and in a new definition of marriage. The evidence provided in this review reflects the focus on same-sex couples (LGB people) and the unfortunate lack of research that explores the transgender and intersex experience.

ACON, NSW's leading HIV support, HIV prevention and LGBTI health organisation, and the Centre for Social Research in Health at UNSW have released a report on the public health evidence relating to marriage equality for LGBTI people. The report can be accessed [here](#).

It is important to note that transgender people may be differently impacted by a plebiscite or debate on marriage equality, particularly those who are already married and unable to amend the sex on their birth certificate without divorcing their husband or wife. Intersex people too may feel excluded from these debates.

Evidence provided within this resource reflects the focus on same-sex couples (LGB people) due to the nature of existing research. Within this document we have utilised the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) acronym due to the nature of existing research, and practice.

\***LGBTI** = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex

\***LGBT** = lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

\***LGB** = lesbian, gay and bisexual

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage equality remains out of reach for some people in Australia's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) communities. Despite years of advocacy on this issue has not yet been resolved. Since 2001 a variety of countries across the globe have legislated marriage equality for same-sex couples. In a world first, Ireland in 2015 held a national referendum to resolve the issue, as a change to their constitution was required.

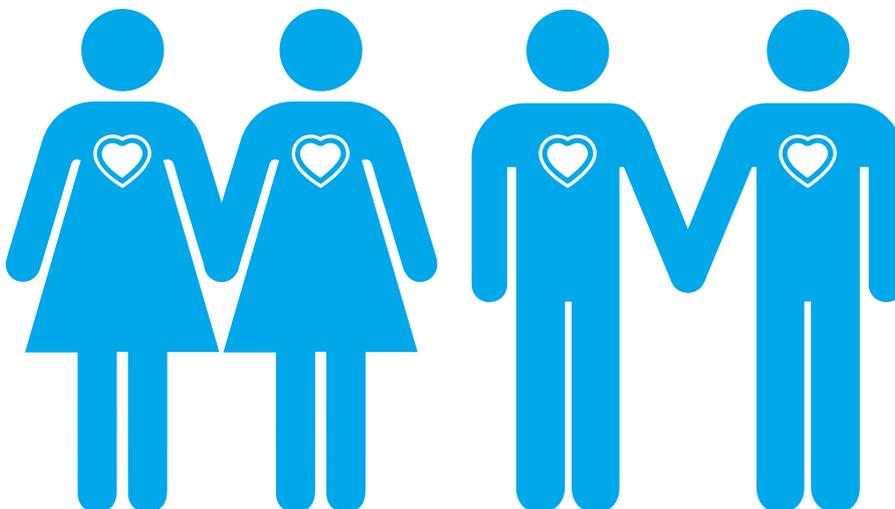
The political process to enable change on marriage equality in Australia is currently under debate, it is not clear whether a plebiscite or a free vote in parliament will be the mechanism to bring about change on this issue. If the enabling legislation for a plebiscite on marriage equality does not pass through both houses of parliament the marriage equality debate will continue.

With debate on marriage equality increasing, and talk of a potential plebiscite, Australia is already starting to witness an increase in anti-LGBTI commentary and the organisation of anti-marriage equality groups to speak on behalf of some cultural and religious populations.

It has long been the view that a plebiscite on marriage equality would incite destructive debate that will escalate homophobic, biphobic and transphobic views and further impact our LGBTI youth; a group already at risk of social isolation, discrimination and increased mental health issues. The impacts go beyond youth as many adults will experience an intensity of debate around their human rights; their unsuitability to marry, become parents and have a family that will only escalate as both sides argue their case. Not to mention, the humiliation of their right to marry being put to a public vote.

This document has been designed to assist employers in the support of their employees during this time. It is envisaged that the document will provide employers with a critical resource through which they can then develop their own internal communications, initiatives or processes.

We will first look at some commonly asked questions before providing a broader overview of the impact of stigma and discrimination within LGBTI populations, both socially and in the workplace. In the final section of this document we provide suggestions to organisations, HR practitioners, people leaders and employee network groups on how to support your employees through this debate.



## ABOUT THE MARRIAGE EQUALITY DEBATE

This section poses frequently asked questions in regard to the debate on marriage equality, as well as a potential plebiscite. It has been designed to provide you with background information, assisting you with internal communications and provide you with details as to how you can support your employees during this time.

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### What Is A Plebiscite?

A plebiscite is a nationwide vote to gauge public feedback on a political proposal. A plebiscite is different to a referendum which is a national vote on an amendment to the Constitution.

In 2013 the High Court found that the definition of “marriage” in the Constitution includes same-sex unions. This made it clear the Federal Parliament has the power to enact marriage equality. Therefore, no referendum is required. In Ireland a referendum was required because its constitutional definition of “marriage” explicitly defined it as a heterosexual union.

#### When Could A Plebiscite On Marriage Equality Be Held?

At this stage, a plebiscite date has been tabled by the Australian Government for 11 February 2017.

#### Will The Plebiscite Result Be Binding?

At present, indications are that the government’s decision will not be bound to the result of the plebiscite.

#### How Much Could The Plebiscite Cost?

The Australian Government has budgeted \$170 million to conduct the plebiscite for marriage equality. PwC has recently modelled that the real cost to the Australian economy could be as high as \$525 million.

The PwC modelling estimates that a standalone plebiscite will cost the taxpayer \$158 million to facilitate, \$66 million for the community to fund the “for” and “against” campaigns, \$281 million in lost productivity as people take time out to vote, and at least \$20 million in costs associated with the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of Australian citizens.

#### Will The Plebiscite Be Mandatory?

At the time of publication, it has been widely reported in mainstream media that voting in the plebiscite will be mandatory, with fines in place for those who do not participate in voting.

#### What If There Is No Plebiscite?

If the plebiscite for marriage equality is not passed through the House of Representatives and the Senate, it may eventuate that there is no free vote in Parliament in this term of government.

# RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION AND STIGMA ON LGBTI COMMUNITIES & ALLIES

The impacts of stigma and discrimination on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community are well documented. We know that:

## STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IMPACTS ON LGBTI POPULATIONS

- Almost half of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people hide their sexuality or gender identity because they fear violence or discrimination, with young people aged 16 to 24 more likely to do so than any other age group (1).
- Among LGB populations, research clearly indicates that discrimination, abuse (both verbal and physical), exclusion and prejudice are key contributors to the increased rates of depression, anxiety and self-harm (2).
- When compared with heterosexual people, homosexual and bisexual people are twice as likely to experience anxiety (31.5 per cent compared with 14.1 per cent) and three times as likely to experience depression and related disorders (19 per cent compared with 6 per cent) (3).
- A 2007 survey of Australian and New Zealand transgender people found that almost 90 per cent had experienced at least one form of stigma or discrimination, including verbal abuse, social exclusion, receiving lesser treatment due to their name or sex on documents, physical threats and violence (4).

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## MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING IMPACTS ASSOCIATED WITH A PLEBISCITE

During anti-LGB political campaigns, inflammatory and negative messages based on false stereotypes and misinformation have been used in print, electronic and broadcast media, political rallies and other social interactions (5).

Evidence shows that popular debates on marriage equality such as plebiscites and referendums encourage hate speech, discrimination and harm amongst the LGB community.

US research has shown that the mental health of LGB people suffered significantly during referenda debates on marriage equality. For LGB people who experienced a US state referendum on marriage equality there was a:

- 37% increase in mood disorders;
- 42% increase in alcohol-use disorders;
- 248% in generalised anxiety disorders.

In states without such referenda, there was no increase (6).

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## MINORITY STRESS EFFECTS ON THE LGB POPULATION

Minority Stress is the chronic stress that accompanies a stigmatised social status such as LGB. The primary components of minority stress include experiences of discrimination, anticipation of rejection, concealment or disclosure of the stigmatised identity, and internalised negative views of self as a result of the stigmatised identity (7).

It has been shown that anti-LGB political messages increase the specific minority stressors that are associated with the negative environment created by campaigns for or against marriage

equality. For people who identify as LGB living in the midst of these debates, the result is that they are exposed to more negative messages and conversations about LGBTI people. They also experience greater negative effects related specifically to the debate on marriage equality, and are more frequently involved in LGB activist/protest efforts (8). It has also been shown that living in an environment that has recently denied access to civil marriage is associated with higher levels of psychological distress in the LGB community.

“ In terms of how public debate affects me, I simply try to avoid too much exposure to it because the homophobia upsets and angers me so much... I show up for rallies and other things when I think I can tolerate what I might hear and don't go when I think I might lose my temper. When I get exposed to too much of it, I end up very angry and depressed, sometimes for weeks following, and that then affects my relationships, my work and my happiness” (9).

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### **MINORITY STRESS EFFECTS ON SAME-SEX COUPLES**

LGB people in same-sex relationships are potentially exposed to additional forms of minority stress because they are not only stigmatised as individuals, but the status of their relationship is also disadvantaged relative to heterosexual relationships (10).

Not only are same-sex couples barred from marrying in many countries throughout the world, they are reminded of this fact on a daily basis by debates among family and co-workers, as well as in social and news media in countries and regions where marriage equality is contested (11).

During the months leading up to a vote (plebiscite or referendum) on marriage equality or pending judicial decision, LGB people encounter billboards, yard signs, bumper stickers, print, broadcast and online media comment against equal access to marriage rights (12).

Minority stress is theorised to have an effect on wellbeing above and beyond the effect of general stress common to all couples (10). Recent research has shown that minority stress in the form of stressful life events exerts a greater negative impact on health than general stressful life events (13).

Present studies show that regardless of the policy decision itself, the societal conversation that emerges leading up to important policy decisions about same-sex marriage can manifest as a devaluing social discourse surrounding the lives of same-sex couples, and exposure to this devaluing social discourse can have serious and deleterious consequences for same-sex couples' psychological and relational well-being (12).

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### **EFFECT OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE DEBATES ON HETEROSEXUAL ALLIES**

Very few studies on the impact of debates surrounding marriage equality on heterosexual or “straight” allies exists. Interviews conducted by Arm, Horne and Levitt (14) of heterosexual people who had LGB family members and who lived in Tennessee during the marriage amendment campaign of 2006 revealed that the interviewees experienced feelings of anger, distress and fear. These interviewees reported relationship tensions with those around them who saw the issue differently or did not want to be involved. Participants felt compelled to continue the fight for equality. For some, this compulsion to campaign significantly increased.

“ I had always been your typical southern woman, we didn’t do that kind of thing (protesting). You didn’t want your name in the paper. And I’m thinking, “I’m standing on this street corner, protesting with a sign in my hand, and there’s no going back for me now. I’ll never be that woman again. I don’t want to be.” (14).

It is important to acknowledge that family members, friends, and allies of LGB people may very well be subject to the negative consequences of a debate on same-sex marriage as they are implicated on account of their association with the targeted group (15).

## WORKPLACE IMPACTS ASSOCIATED DEBATES ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Stigma, social isolation, direct and indirect harassment also filter into the workplace with many LGBTI people choosing not to disclose their sexual orientation in their workplace. For those that do disclose there are higher incidents of bullying and harassment, and some of these individuals have reported to have seriously considering leaving their place of work as a direct result.

The 2016 Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) research shows that 17% of young LGBTI people (18-24 years) hide their sexuality at work. For those young people who experience bullying in the workplace related to their sexuality the most common reason for not reporting the bullying was that it would mean “outing themselves”.

The AWEI research also indicates that even though most LGBTI (all ages) respondents who had not been bullied claim they would report if they were, only one-third of those who actually experienced bullying are reporting in reality (16).

While there is a direct correlation between those organisations who are highly active in LGBTI workplace inclusion and their LGBTI employees feeling that they can be themselves at work, we fear that heightened levels of anti-LGBTI as well as homophobic commentary being played out in mainstream and social media or via organised anti-LGBTI/anti-marriage equality groups will escalate similar commentary within workplaces; a real threat to undoing some of the successful inclusion work that has been done by Australian workplaces over the last decade.

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### WORKPLACE IMPACTS OF HEIGHTENED DEBATES ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY

- Increase in LGBTI staff experiencing stress/anxiety.
  - Increase in harmful conversations occurring within workplace.
  - Minority stress impacting on workplace performance and general staff wellbeing.
  - Possible rise of anti-LGBTI or anti-religious/cultural sentiment.
  - Potential creation of an “Us and Them” culture within organisations and social settings.
  - Extended impact on non-LGBTI Allies.
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### HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT YOUR EMPLOYEES THROUGH THESE DEBATES?

To cope with the negative socioemotional consequences of minority stress surrounding campaigns, LGB individuals rely and depend upon social support and their positive interactions with partners, friends and their extended social network (7).

## What Can Your Employee Network Do?

- Acknowledge the potential impact on your employees.
- Send supportive messages/communications to members of your employee network group.
- Check in with LGBTI identifying staff to ensure that they are OK, as appropriate.
- Increase visibility of the existence of the employee network group to all staff.
- Encourage your executive sponsor or champions to be engaged and visible in their support for the network, and for LGBTI employees.
- Increase positive messages of inclusion throughout your organisation.
- Communicate support pathways to staff via regular communications, intranet page, posters.
- Host an event about the debate or plebiscite to inform staff and reiterate support to all staff, the importance of a respectful workplace environment, reaffirming the organisational values that support inclusion.
- Increase touchpoints with members of the network (frequency of meetings, roundtables, networking events throughout the campaign).
- Work collaboratively with other internal and external employee networks.

## What Can Your Allies Do?

- Acknowledge the potential impact on employees.
- Check in with LGBTI identifying staff to ensure that they are OK, as appropriate.
- Reaffirm support for staff wellbeing, including LGBTI employees.
- Be visible as an Ally – put a sign on your desk, wear a badge or pin on your lanyard, actively talk about being an Ally to others, attend as many internal and external LGBTI inclusion events as possible.
- Call out non-inclusive language or behaviour when comfortable doing so.
- Be aware of negative workplace behaviour and of conversations that may turn harmful.
- Increase positive messages for LGBTI staff.
- Keep up to date with the progress of the campaign for marriage equality.
- Volunteer to support your LGBTI employee network.

## What Can HR Practitioners Do?

- Acknowledge the potential impact on employees.
- Ensure that HR is visible, that policies are inclusive of LGBTI employees and that employees can approach HR consultants for support.
- Ensure you have been trained on LGBTI workplace inclusion, in your role as an HR consultant.
- Be aware of “where the line is” in terms of appropriate workplace behaviour.
- Reaffirm the organisation’s code of conduct/values/policies around workplace behaviour.
- Profile the diversity work of the organisation, and actively communicate current progress and future plans for LGBTI inclusion.
- Educate HR contact officers, peer support contacts and anyone else who may be sought out by your LGBTI employees for support.

- Provide training to people leaders specifically in the area of LGBTI workplace inclusion, disclosure sensitivities and support.
- Equip your managers with information on what to look out for, how to challenge discriminatory or offensive behaviour, and how to create a positive team culture of respect and inclusion.
- Provide guidance to all staff on resilience and coping with stress in the workplace.
- Brief your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and ensure that their staff have been recently trained in LGBTI inclusive practice.

### **What Can Managers and Leaders Do?**

- Acknowledge the potential impact on employees.
- Be trained in LGBTI workplace inclusivity.
- Be aware of negative behaviours within the team environment.
- Know what is and what isn't a respectful debate on marriage equality.
- Check in with identifying staff, provide reminders of support available to employees.
- Reiterate the values of the organisation that support inclusion and respect.
- Send a strong message of inclusion as a leader – set firm expectations in line with your organisational values.

### **What Can Your Organisation Do?**

- Develop and distribute a helpful fact sheet to your employees - specifically addressing your organisational standards, values, and expectations of employees.
- Provide staff with a list of external resources, contact information for your Employee Assistance Program.
- Provide LGBTI inclusion training specifically to increase the confidence and ability of your Allies, Managers and HR/Contact Officers.
- Ensure that staff are aware of reporting procedures (for behaviour that is questionable, or not in line with the organisational values, code of conduct or expectations).
- Have your staff trained on LGBTI workplace inclusion.
- If a corporate supporter of Marriage Equality, reaffirm this position internally.
- Determine guidance around harmful conversations, debate and behaviour that is not restrictive to employee's freedoms (reference code of conduct, anti-discrimination policies, values of organisation typically around wellbeing, respect, collaboration, trust etc).

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## **ADDITIONAL EXTERNAL SUPPORT & RESOURCES**

### **LGBTI COUNSELLING SERVICES**

**QLife** - Free national LGBTI phone and web counselling, coast to coast. 1800 184 527 | [qlife.org.au](http://qlife.org.au)

**Lifeline** – 24/7 Crisis Support And Suicide Prevention Services. 13 11 14 | [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

**ACON** - For counselling and referral support. [acon.org.au/mental-health](http://acon.org.au/mental-health)

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES, SUPPORT NETWORKS, & TRAINING**

**ACON** – One of Australia’s largest LGBTI sexual health and wellbeing organisations, with a variety of services on offer, including free rapid HIV testing clinics, counselling, resources, substance support, and more. [acon.org.au](http://acon.org.au)

**Pride in Diversity** – Australia’s only national not-for-profit employer support program for all aspects of LGBTI workplace inclusion. Specialists in HR, organisational change and workplace diversity. Pride in Diversity publishes the Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI), Australia’s national benchmarking instrument for all aspects of LGBTI workplace inclusion. [prideindiversity.com.au](http://prideindiversity.com.au)

**Australian Marriage Equality** - A national organisation working for equal marriage for all consenting adults, as they believe person’s gender or sexuality should not affect their access to Australian marriage. [australianmarriageequality.org](http://australianmarriageequality.org)

**Australians 4 Equality** - A coalition of marriage equality supporters and organisations who have come together to help achieve equality and fairness for all. [a4e.org.au](http://a4e.org.au)

**Beyondblue** - [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

**Black Rainbow** – A social network for Indigenous people who identify as LGBTI, sistergirl or brotherboy. Also advocates for better mental health and suicide prevention. [facebook.com/BlackRainbowAustralia](https://facebook.com/BlackRainbowAustralia)

**Freedom2B** - Assists LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds on their journey to reconciling their faith, sexuality and gender identity. [freedom2b.org](http://freedom2b.org)

**GenderQueer Australia** - Specialises in the support of gender questioning and genderqueer people, their family, friends and professionals who they go to for help - [genderqueer.org.au](http://genderqueer.org.au)

**GLRL** - A lobby organisation fighting to protect and promote the rights of lesbians and gay men living in New South Wales.

**Just Equal** - Taking a stand for equality for LGBTIQ people, their families and friends. [equal.org.au](http://equal.org.au)

**MindOut** - A mental health and suicide prevention project supporting health organisations to be inclusive of LGBTI people. [LGBhealth.org.au/mindout](http://LGBhealth.org.au/mindout)

**Minus18** - Provide mental health, peer mentoring and events to support same-sex attracted and gender-diverse young people from all over Australia. [minus18.org.au](http://minus18.org.au)

**Organisation Intersex International Australia** - Intersex human rights, information, education and peer and family support. [oii.org.au](http://oii.org.au)

**PFLAG Australia** - A non-profit voluntary organisation and support network for parents and families of LGBTI people. [pflagaustralia.org.au](http://pflagaustralia.org.au)

**Rainbow Families** – A group that aims to build a community which fosters resiliency by connecting, supporting and empowering LGBTIQ families. [rainbowfamilies.com.au](http://rainbowfamilies.com.au)

**Twenty10** - A community-based, non-profit, state-wide organisation, working with and supporting people of diverse genders, sexes and sexualities, their families and communities.

## OTHER STATE AND TERRITORY AIDS COUNCILS

### Victoria

VAC

1800 134 840 (counselling centre)

[vac.org.au](http://vac.org.au)

### Western Australia

WA AIDS Council

08 9482 0000

[waaid.com](http://waaid.com)

### Queensland

QUAC

07 3017 1777

[quac.org.au](http://quac.org.au)

### Tasmania

tasCHARD

03 6234 1242

[www.tascahrd.org.au](http://www.tascahrd.org.au)

### Northern Territory

NTAHC

08 8944 7777 (Darwin)

[ntahc.org.au](http://ntahc.org.au)

### ACT

AIDS Action Council

[aidsaction.org.au](http://aidsaction.org.au)

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