Sayoni

VIOLENCE & DISCRIMINATION AGAINST LBTQ WOMEN IN SINGAPORE

DOCUMENTATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

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FOREWORD

I was overwhelmed as I read this report. Overwhelmed by admiration and sadness: admiration for the courage and resilience of the LBTQ community, and sadness that pain, discrimination, and abuse are so much a part of their everyday lives. As an activist for social justice and women's rights for over 30 years, I have witnessed the hard and painful journey of Sayoni and its members to address the immense injustice they have suffered.

Very early on in my advocacy for women's rights in AWARE, I learnt how extremely difficult it is to change cultural attitudes, laws, and policies. The struggle to win rights for LBTQ members is doubly hard and challenging. Far too many people simply define queer women by their sexuality and sexual behaviour. This does a grave injustice to LBTQ people by erasing their humanity.

With this report, Sayoni has taken an important step in its advocacy to change cultural attitudes, as well as laws and policies. The stories vividly show how LBTQ citizens in Singapore are doubly marginalised for their gender and also their sexual orientation – how they face violence and discrimination in every sphere of their lives and how this affects their economic, emotional, and psychological well-being.

It is shocking to learn that almost a quarter of those interviewed suffered sexual violence when they were children. One transgender boy ended up in hospital for a month after being beaten by his father. Sadly, LBTQ youth are so often rejected and abused by their own families. Being different is in itself a struggle in a patriarchal society, and it is made so much worse when you cannot rely on receiving love, comfort, and security in the very place that so many of us take for granted – the family.

Often, LBTQ youth remain silent about their sexuality and the abuse. But this invisibility is a double-edged sword. The 'closet' provides a degree of protection from social discrimination, abuse, and harassment. But this means hiding fundamental aspects of the self and can have an impact personally and socially. The ability to form a community, to associate, to organise, and assemble are of great importance to LGBTQ groups, and yet these fundamental rights are often denied. Over the years, Sayoni as well as other LGBTQ groups have been denied registration by government authorities.

Civil society can come together to work towards a more fair and just society. Sayoni's Jean Chong shared some of the stories from the report at the Ready4Repeal town hall held in September 2018. The event was attended by more than 800 people who showed up to support the call for the repeal of the anti-sodomy law, Section 377A of the Penal Code. The petition calling for the repeal was signed by some 50,000 people.

Civil society has been the consistent voice, the everyday voice of conscience, and an invaluable advocate for those without voice, those who are marginalised. However, campaigns and calls for rights will only go so far. It is the human stories that will have the most impact, stories that people will understand and that appeal to their humanity.

Sayoni makes a call in this report that we should all heed: "Support from the state through legislation and policy would send a positive message to the LBTQ community and would also allow the state to fulfil its responsibilities as a signatory to international conventions such as CEDAW, CRC, and the UPR. For example, repealing Section 377A of the Penal Code and changing censorship guidelines would send a clear signal to Singaporean society that being LBTQ is not immoral and that all citizens have the right to live free from violence and discrimination regardless of their sexuality."

This is a call to action, one which I hope the authorities in particular will heed. Individually, we all have a role to play in bringing forward the day when all LGBTQ persons, everywhere, are accepted and treated as equals. The time really has come.

Constance Singam
Veteran civil society activist

NOTE FROM UN WOMEN ASIA-PACIFIC

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is unequivocal: we are all born free and equal. Yet worldwide, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) persons routinely experience violence and discrimination. These acts of violence, rooted in rigid gender norms and discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia, undermine the universality of human rights and present significant barriers to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

As UN Women's work worldwide on violence against women and gender-based violence has documented, violence carries devastating costs for survivors, communities, and countries, with detrimental impacts on survivors' mental and physical health, as well as on the social and economic progress of communities. These impacts are often compounded for LBTQ people, whose sexual orientation and gender identity and expression may be stigmatised or even criminalised. Discriminatory laws and attitudes further exacerbate social and economic exclusion, limiting access of LBTQ persons to education, employment, healthcare, and other public services. This has a detrimental effect on their ability to fully enjoy their rights and both contribute to and benefit from sustainable and inclusive development.

As this study and others around the world illustrate, LBTQ people experience diverse and pervasive forms of violence in both private and public settings, from psychical, psychological, and sexual violence at the hands of family members and intimate partners, to the fear with which many LBTQ individuals live their lives. The legal and social repercussions of coming into contact with authorities may prevent LBTQ persons who have experienced violence from seeking help and result in their being excluded from services. Without supportive formal systems and services to address acts of violence and discrimination, the physical, psychological, and material impacts of violence can be both long-lasting and devastating.

LBTQ people have the right to live free from violence and discrimination in all aspects of their private and public lives. Many different sectors have a role to play in ending violence and discrimination against LBTQ individuals, including by repealing discriminatory laws and revising policies related to education, employment, healthcare, and housing, just to mention a few. These changes can help ensure that LBTQ individuals are able to fully benefit from and contribute to society, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

Preventing and effectively addressing violations of human rights against LBTQ persons speaks directly to the overall promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the principle of "Leaving no one behind". As we work towards our shared goal of achieving gender equality, we stand proudly with LBTQ people working to combat stigma, discrimination, and violence, to realise the achievement of human rights for all.

Anna-Karin Jatfors
Regional Director a.i.,
UN Women Regional Office
for Asia & the Pacific

MESSAGE FROM SAYONI

Since Sayoni was formed 12 years ago, many members of the LBTQI community have related to us their experiences of violence and discrimination. But these incidents have rarely been documented in a concrete and systematic way, so remain invisible to much of Singapore society and the government. As recently as September 2018, Singapore's Education Minister claimed that the LGBTQ community faces "no discrimination at work, housing (and) education." We know this, sometimes from personal experience, to be patently untrue.

We embarked on this project because we want to make sure that those who have lived through these experiences are heard and that their voices are counted. As we interviewed one participant after another, we were saddened and horrified at the pain they had to endure, often over prolonged periods of time. At the same time, we found some comfort in another thread that emerged during the interviews – the strength of each person who survived extremely trying situations, sometimes at great cost, and who continues to thrive today.

There are many inequalities inherent in being a woman in a patriarchy; being lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer multiplies already marginalised states, especially for persons of a minority race (non-Chinese in the Singapore context). Living in this intersection in Asia often means being subject to the shackles of family and culture. Amid these struggles, we saw our interviewees being attacked, either overtly or covertly, by their families, by strangers, in public places but also in the private, 'safe' spaces of the home.

Change is long overdue and urgently needed, in the form of more support for those in the LBTQI community who need it and the reforming of deep structures in society that currently uphold the conditions in which violence and discrimination take place. We believe that the Singapore government should lead the way, in concert with civil society and voluntary welfare organisations.

This is the hope of the project team, which has devoted time over a number of years to complete this documentation. It is also the hope of our participants, many of whom related their dreams of a better life. Discriminatory policies and laws can and must be amended to ensure true equity for all members of our society.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AWARE	Association of Women for Action and Research
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
Coming out	Self-disclosure of one's sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics
CPF	Central Provident Fund
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
IPV	Intimate partner violence
HDB	Housing and Development Board
LBTQ	Lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer
MOE	Ministry of Education
Queer	An umbrella term for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transgender, intersex, or of any other non-heterosexual sexuality, sexual anatomy or gender identity
SOGIESC	Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics
TAFEP	Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS, GENDER IDENTITY, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are inalienable from human rights and are not new or special rights.[1,2] According to the Yogyakarta Principles: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. All human rights are universal, interdependent, indivisible, and interrelated. Sexual orientation and gender identity are integral to every person's dignity and humanity and must not be the basis for discrimination or abuse."[3] Furthermore, as stated in the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10,[4] an individual's gender identity and expression as well as their sexual orientation are intersectional. These characteristics intersect with identity categories such as age, ethnicity, indigeneity, and nationality to produce very distinct experiences and needs. Yet, worldwide, people commonly experience violence and discrimination because of their actual or perceived SOGIESC. Women who transgress gender norms are likely to be targeted for violence because their clothes and behaviour do not conform to what is expected of heterosexual, 'normal' women. In other words, they are viewed as deviant because of their sexual orientation and gender non-conformity. They are also more likely to experience physical harm because they are women and so become easier targets for punitive or corrective rape as well as physical abuse.[5]

Nevertheless, the subject 'woman' is more complex than being female by sex. The category 'woman', understood only in opposition to the sex 'man', is a subject category that reproduces the sex/gender binary of the heterosexual matrix. In this matrix, the category 'woman' is linked to the female sex and feminine gender and is juxtaposed against the category 'man', which is linked to the male sex and masculine gender. The two play a crucial role in reproducing a truth effect that is used to legitimise the hegemony of heteronormativity, while disenfranchising subjects who do not neatly occupy binary categories of the matrix. This matrix negates the reality of the fluid nature of gender and sexual identity as experienced by many individuals today.[6] Human rights research and human rights treaty bodies like the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that champion the cause of gender and sexuality rights must, therefore, challenge heteronormativity[7,8] and make room for more fluid constructions, experiences, and subjectivities of gender and sexuality. These

1 Cai Wilkinson and Anthony J. Langlois, "Not Such an International Human Rights Norm? Local Resistance to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights—Preliminary Comments", *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (2014): 250.

2 Anthony J. Langlois, "Human Rights, 'Orientation,' and ASEAN", *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (2014): 307-321.

3 *The Yogyakarta Principles*, http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles-en.

4 *The Yogyakarta Principles plus 10*, http://yogyakartaprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A5_yogyakartaWEB-2.pdf.

5 Michael O'Flaherty and John Fisher, "Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and International Human Rights Law: Contexualising the Yogyakarta Principles", *Human Rights Law Review* 8, no. 2 (2008): 211.

6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

7 Michael J. Bosia, "Strange Fruit: Homophobia, the State, and the Politics of LGBT Rights and Capabilities", *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (2014): 256-273.

8 Wilkinson and Langlois, 250.

subjectivities are made more complex as they intersect with other identity categories that include, but are not limited to, age, ethnicity, and class.

A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH FOR GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY

A human rights approach allows for greater accountability by states to marginalised groups in society and is founded on the concept of social justice.[9] It is an approach that allows vulnerable populations to make "claims for social justice … that are framed in a language of rights", where human rights can be "transformed into tools that become relevant to the everyday struggles of marginalised peoples".[10] Some states take an anti-foundationalist approach to human rights, arguing that human rights are not fixed or static and so cannot be imposed from elsewhere. They are opposed to the human rights approach, calling it an ideological approach that is dislocated from social context. The anti-foundationalist approach is problematic because it implies that human rights are disconnected from social context or culture when, in fact, "no culture or comprehensive doctrine is 'by nature', or in any given or fixed way, either compatible or incompatible with human rights".[11] Further, as Donnelly argues, "cultures are immensely malleable, as are the political expressions of comprehensive doctrines. It is an empirical question whether (any, some or most) members of a culture or exponents of a comprehensive doctrine support human rights as a political conception of justice".[12]

As a country that is a signatory to CEDAW, Singapore has worked hard to improve the rights of women in areas such as education, employment, and health. The principle of equal rights for all women includes the commitment to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. For Singapore, this must also include the elimination of discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC in the areas of employment, healthcare, housing, ability to remain in education, and the security of young persons. These are basic rights of all Singaporeans and access to them cannot be delinked from SOGIESC issues.

The CEDAW committee, in its 2017 Concluding Observations on the fifth periodic report of Singapore,[13] paragraphs 40 and 41, wrote: "40. The Committee expresses its concern that lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex women face discrimination in various areas of life and that their situation is often exacerbated by the policies of the state party, including its media policy. 41. The Committee recommends that the state party ensure that lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex women are effectively protected against all forms of discrimination in law and in practice, including by undertaking educational and awareness-raising campaigns to combat discriminatory stereotypes, including in its media policies".

Moreover, as a member state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in support of 'ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together', Singapore and other ASEAN countries have reiterated the need for a people-oriented approach. Langlois et al have argued that gender diversity and same-sex relations have a well-documented history in ASEAN, and individuals and communities of non-conforming SOGIESC must therefore be recognised as ASEAN people and members of the ASEAN community.[14] Singapore operates within both a global and regional context, not just a national one. As a signatory of CEDAW and participant in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the state can and should be held accountable to global standards of human rights, which are inclusive of SOGIESC and "have been

9 Jack Donnelly, "The Relative Universality of Human Rights", *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2007): 281-306.

10 Anthony Tirado Chase, "Human Rights Contestations: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity", *The International Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 6 (2016): 703.

11 Donnelly, 281-306.

12 Ibid.

13 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of Singapore", https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/SGP/CO/5&Lang=En.

14 Anthony J. Langlois et al., "Community Identity, Orientation: Sexuality, Gender and Rights in ASEAN", *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 5 (2017): 710-728.

articulated and codified"[15] as world standards of best practice.

SINGAPORE'S 'PRAGMATIC APPROACH' TO HUMAN RIGHTS

According to the government, Singapore takes a pragmatic and non-ideological approach to human rights, as reported at the country's UPR session in 2015. The government expressed that it is fully committed to protecting the human rights of Singaporeans by focusing on social protection matters and preserving social harmony.[16] The rationale for such an approach is based on the premise that "human rights exist in specific cultural, social, economic, and historical contexts" and that "accommodation must be reached among the competing rights of the individuals who make up the nation and the interests of society as a whole".[17] The construction of society and the nation as consisting of individuals with competing interests is problematic, as it does not take into consideration the importance of social justice and the systematic exclusion and inequality experienced by individuals from particular communities – in this instance, Singapore's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community.

Individual rights are seen as secondary and needing to be managed pragmatically as they compete with "the interests of the nation and society as a whole". The government discourse constructs society and the nation as a whole, rather than as the product of social processes and relations rooted in principles of social justice and equality, as enshrined in the tenets of the Singapore Constitution and Pledge. This report argues that the government must lead the way for society by supporting the idea of "human rights as a political conception of justice".[18] This is in opposition to promoting what Bosia and Weiss[19] call "political homophobia", in the government's insistence that Singapore as a society is not ready to recognise human rights in the form of SOGIESC.

REPORT AIMS AND OUTLINE

Sayoni, as a Singapore-based organisation that uses a feminist framework to carry out advocacy and organisation for equality for all SOGIESC, is uniquely placed to carry out this documentation study on lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other queer (LBTQ) women, and transgender men. As far as we know, this is the first attempt to systematically document the experiences of LBTQ women in Singapore.

This book contains 14 chapters, 10 of which are empirically driven. Interviews were conducted with 40 interviewees in Singapore over a period of nine months (see Chapter 3, Methodology). Our aims were fourfold:

1. To document individual experiences of discrimination and/or violence through a series of semi-structured interviews with LBTQ women
2. To gather information and feedback from state and non-state stakeholders to provide the context in which the discrimination and violence experienced by LBTQ women in Singapore takes place
3. To analyse the interview material collected and present our findings in a report that may be used for advocacy and educational purposes
4. To make use of the report to produce advocacy and publicity material that may be used to educate stakeholders, the general public and the general LGBTQ community in Singapore and internationally

In the chapters that follow, we provide evidence of violence and discrimination based on SOGIESC: how it manifested (details of what happened, when

15 Ibid.

16 Charissa Yong, "Singapore's Approach to Human Rights 'Pragmatic', Says Govt in Report to the United Nations", *The Straits Times* , December 11, 2015, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapores-approach-to-human-rights-pragmatic-says-govt-in-report-to-the-united-nations.

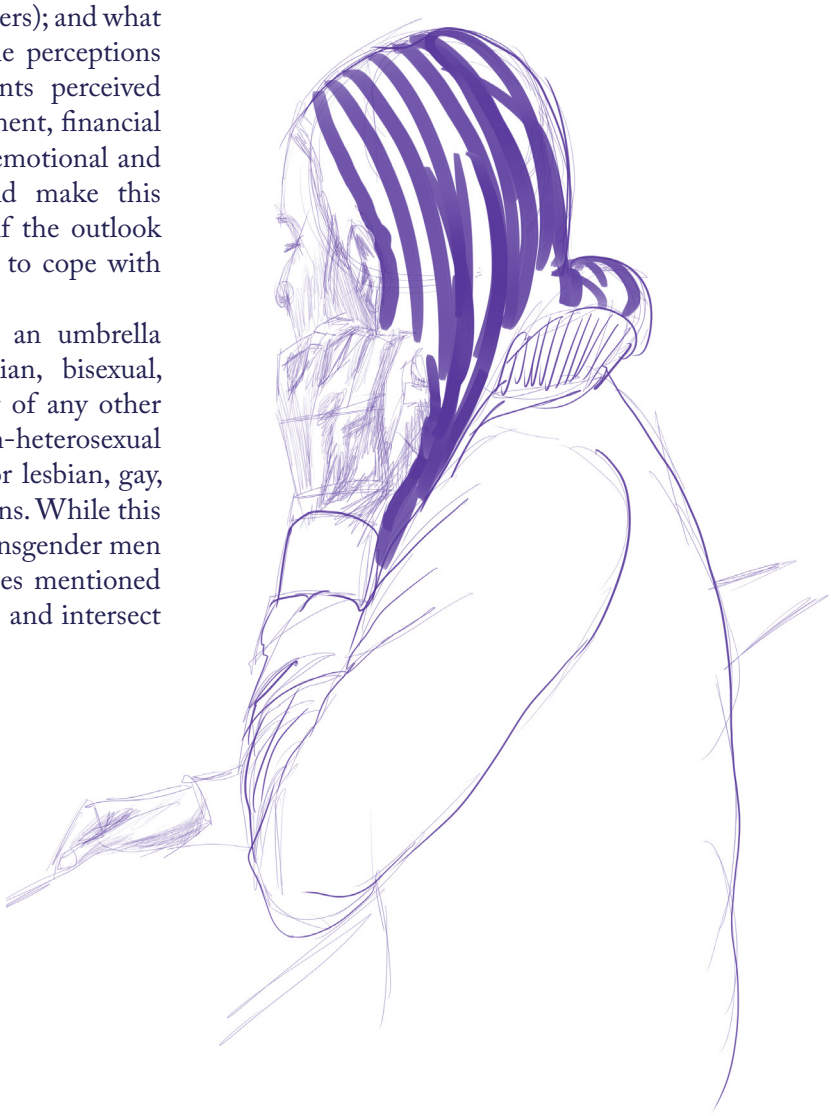
17 Ibid.

18 Donnelly, 281-306.

19 Michael J. Bosia & Meredith L. Weiss, *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression* (Champaign, IL, US: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

it happened); where incidents took place (e.g. at home, in school, at work); and who were involved (e.g. family members, friends, state employees). We analyse the effects of violence and discrimination based on SOGIESC: how they influence personal safety and emotional/psychological well-being; how they impact interpersonal relationships; and how actual or perceived SOGIESC aids or inhibits access to healthcare, housing, education, and employment. We also analyse experiences of seeking help when facing discrimination and violence: whom our respondents approached when faced with violence or threats to their personal safety or privacy; whom they sought help from when faced with discrimination (e.g. state service providers, non-state actors, civil society activists, politicians or Members of Parliament, friends, partners, extended family members); and what the outcomes were. Finally, we examine perceptions of the future: whether our respondents perceived their futures to be secure (e.g. employment, financial security, health/care needs, family life, emotional and psychological well-being); what would make this outlook more positive for them; and, if the outlook was not positive, what steps they took to cope with discrimination.

In this report, 'queer' is used as an umbrella term for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transgender, intersex, or of any other sexual anatomy, gender identity or non-heterosexual sexuality. It is commonly a synonym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons. While this report focuses on LBTQ women and transgender men only – an LGBTQ subgroup – the issues mentioned invariably intertwine with LGBTQ ones and intersect with women's issues.



Chapter 2

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Singapore has ratified the United Nations human rights treaties CEDAW, Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is also part of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and actively participates in UPR sessions, reflecting its commitment to abide by international standards of human rights. Article 12 of the Singapore Constitution also codifies the right to equal protection of the law for all persons. Yet human rights violations against LBTQ women in the country remain largely invisible and persistent. In recognition of the significant gaps in rights protection and information regarding the current situation of LBTQ women in Singapore, Sayoni embarked on this study focusing on documenting discrimination and violence on the basis of SOGIESC.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY IN SINGAPORE SOCIETY

Policies and laws in Singapore continue to be conservative and premised on the notion of the heterosexual two-parent family being the basic unit of society.[1] Over the years, LGBTQ voices have increasingly made themselves heard and recognised by the government, with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stating in 2015 that "there are gay people in Singapore and they have a place to stay here and we let them live their own lives. And we do not harass them or discriminate against them".[2] On the international stage, the rights of LGBTQ persons in Singapore were included for the first time in the government's UPR national report,[3] which was submitted to the United Nations for the second UPR review of Singapore on 27 January 2016. The report explained that the government's approach, including its refusal to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code criminalising sex between men, was "to accommodate the sensitivities of different communities". It also stated that Section 377A would not be proactively enforced and that "all Singaporean citizens, regardless of their sexual orientation, are free to lead their lives and pursue their activities in their private space without fear of violence or personal insecurity", that LGBTQ people do not face discrimination in schools or in the workplace, and that "the government does not discriminate against persons seeking a job in the civil service on the basis of their sexual orientation".[4]

However, it is doubtful whether these declarations have been reflected in current practice in Singapore: Laws remain unequal for same-sex partnerships and gay sex. Same-sex marriage "solemnised in Singapore or elsewhere" is explicitly prohibited in the Women's Charter, and spousal rights – such as housing subsidies, family planning rights, spousal medical rights, and inheritance and intestacy laws

1 "Supporting Families", Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore, February 20, 2017, https://www.msf.gov.sg/policies/Strong-and-Stable-Families/Supporting-Families/Pages/default.aspx.

2 Terry Xu, "PM Lee Hsien Loong: Singapore Not Ready for Same-Sex Marriage Due to Conservative Society", *The Online Citizen*, June 5, 2015, https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/06/05/pm-lee-hsien-loong-singapore-not-ready-for-same-sex-marriage-due-to-conservative-society/.

3 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, *UPR National Report* (2015), https://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/dam/mfa/images/media_center/special_events/upr/Singapore%20UPR%20National%20Report%20(2015).pdf.

4 Ibid.

– are therefore withheld from same-sex partners. Although the Women's Charter allows marriage between post-operative persons, provided that the couple are of opposite genders, marriage to someone of the same assigned sex is similarly prohibited for pre-operative trans men.[5] Even marriages between persons of the opposite sex may be invalid if one of them subsequently undergoes sex reassignment surgery: in 2017, the Registry of Marriages voided the marriage of two persons who were male and female when they registered their marriage after one of the two had transitioned.[6] The validity of this decision remains untested in the courts, as the couple dropped the lawsuit they had initiated to challenge the voiding of their marriage.[7]

Section 377A, a legacy of British colonial laws that criminalises consensual oral and anal intercourse between men,[8] was upheld as constitutional by the Court of Appeal in 2014 in response to two court challenges. In its decision, the court stated that Section 377A did not violate the Singapore Constitution, which recognises discrimination only in terms of race, religion, descent, or place of birth but excludes gender, sex, and sexual orientation.[9] The court also noted that the decision to repeal was within the jurisdiction of the legislature and not of the judicial branch. Its position was echoed by the Prime Minister, who maintained that there were "no plans to repeal 377A", as the government's role was not to change social mores in a society deemed "not that liberal".[10] The government stressed that legislation against homosexuals would not be "proactively enforced" and that it is "fully committed" to protecting the rights of its citizens.[11] However, Attorney-General Lucien Wong clarified in October 2018 that the "impression that the exercise of the Public Prosecutor's discretion has been removed or restricted in respect of Section 377A" is inaccurate, citing an example of a case in 2008.[12] In other words, accused persons may still be charged under Section 377A, subject to the Public Prosecutor's discretion, and gay men remain vulnerable to being arrested under the law.

The existence of Section 377A effectively means that gay and bisexual men, and by extension all persons of minority SOGIESC, remain unequal members of the population who can potentially be prosecuted. The result is reinforcement of the societal stigma against all LGBTQ citizens, creating a hostile environment and sustaining discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes. Although Section 377A does not criminalise LBTQ women, it institutionalises a legislative and administrative framework of discrimination based on sexuality and gender, and promotes violence and discrimination. This disproportionately affects LBTQ women, who are disadvantaged in multiple and intersectional ways due to their gender, race, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity and expression. Our report sought to look at individuals who exist in these intersections, map out incidents of violence and discrimination that have occurred across their lives, and examine the common patterns these violations have taken.

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5 Women's Charter, Singapore, Cap 353 (2009 Rev Ed), https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/WC1961#pr12-.

6 Kirsten Han, "A Straight Married Couple Became a Same-Sex One and Singapore's Famous Efficiency Broke Down", *Quartz*, June 14, 2017, https://qz.com/988514/a-straight-married-couple-became-a-same-sex-one-and-singapores-famous-efficiency-broke-down/.

7 K. C. Vijayan, "Same-Sex Couple Drop Case Against ROM for Voiding Their Marriage", *The Straits Times*, May 17, 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/same-sex-couple-drop-case-against-rom.

8 Penal Code Section 377A, Singapore, Cap 224, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ProvIds=pr377A-.

9 Singapore Academy of Law, "Lim Meng Suang and Another v Attorney-General and Another Appeal and Another Matter [2014] SGCA 53", http://www.singaporelaw.sg/sglaw/laws-of-singapore/case-law/free-law/court-of-appeal-judgments/15754-lim-meng-suang-and-another-v-attorney-generaland-another-appeal-and-another-matter-2014-sgca-53.

10 "Govt Has No Plans to Repeal Section 377a for Now", *TODAY*, March 2, 2017, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/govt-has-no-plans-repeal-section-377a-now.

11 "Decision to Retain Section 377A 'Carefully Considered, Balanced'", *TODAY*, December 11, 2015, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/govt-says-decision-retain-section-377a-carefully-considered-balanced.

12 Jonathan Wong, "A-G: Prosecutor's Discretion on Section 377A Not Curbed", *The Straits Times*, October 3, 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/a-g-prosecutors-discretion-on-section-377a-not-curbed.

The framework of discrimination extends to the limitation of positive LBTQ representation in the media through strict media codes and fines. These are extremely effective in making all media companies self-censor any content they create or distribute in Singapore, as the media is not allowed to "promote or normalise a homosexual lifestyle".[13] Images of homosexuality are only endorsed by these media codes when LGBTQ people are portrayed as deviants, depressive, suicidal, or promiscuous, threatening heteronormative family values. Such negative representations, on top of the state's acquiescence to anti-LGBTQ groups, reinforce negative stereotypes of LGBTQ persons. The absence of structures of protection makes LBTQ women and trans men vulnerable to acts of discrimination and violence enacted by members of the public, state officials, and family members.

In schools, sexuality education is prohibited from presenting homosexuality in a neutral light, adding to the invisibility and marginalisation of LBTQ individuals. In 2009, women from a Christian group took over the executive committee of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) after AWARE's sexuality programmes in public schools portrayed homosexuality as neutral, instead of immoral.[14] Following this incident, the Ministry of Education (MOE) imposed tighter controls on sexuality education programmes. However, it was revealed in 2014 that the MOE had hired at least one provider that spread sexist and anti-diversity beliefs.[15] In February 2014, the Health Promotion Board posted a Frequently Asked Questions website educating youths on sexual health, then removed links to LGBTQ-friendly support resources after complaints from members of the public and religious groups.[16] Anti-LGBTQ groups also lobbied to withdraw children's books that portray same-sex families and promote family diversity – one of which was about a family of penguins – from circulation. After intensive lobbying, the books were moved from the children's section to the adult section of public libraries.[17]

The invisibility of SOGIESC is also prevalent in healthcare. SOGIESC sensitivity training is not provided for healthcare staff. Women in same-sex relationships are unable to make use of their savings in the mandatory health savings scheme to pay for their partner's medical expenses in public hospitals. For transgender men and women, there is only one public hospital that has a few doctors who can provide sensitive care and access to hormone therapy.[18]

At the grassroots level, the main players driving the discourse around sexual orientation and gender identity are civil society, the LGBTQ community, and vocal anti-LGBTQ voices, with the government and its agencies occasionally stepping in to police boundaries but more frequently abetting homophobia and transphobia with their inaction, inadequate law enforcement, or unequal treatment of SOGIESC-related violations. The annual LGBTQ rally Pink Dot has attracted the attention of the homophobic and transphobic public in recent years. In 2014, Christian and Muslim groups ran a Wear White campaign, dressing in white clothes to protest against Pink Dot. The Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, tried to discourage all parties from championing any causes.[19] The campaign

13 Boon Chan, "Same theme, different takes", *The Straits Times,* February 23, 2011.

14 Amelia Tan, "Get Facts Right on Sex Education: Iswaran", *The Straits Times*, April 29, 2009, http://www.asiaone.com/News/Education/Story/A1Story20090429-138261.html.

15 Pearl Lee and Amelia Tan, "Relationship Workshop: Controversial Course to End by December", *The Straits Times*, October 9, 2014, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/relationship-workshop-controversial-course-to-end-by-december.

16 Andrew Loh, "'FAQ on Sexuality' by HPB Turns Controversial", *TOC*, February 5, 2014, https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2014/02/05/faq-on-sexuality-by-hpb-turns-controversial.

17 Pearl Lee, "NLB Provokes Mixed Response by Moving Controversial Children's Books to Adult Section", *The Straits Times*, July 18, 2014, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nlb-provokes-mixed-response-by-moving-controversial-childrens-books-to-adult-section.

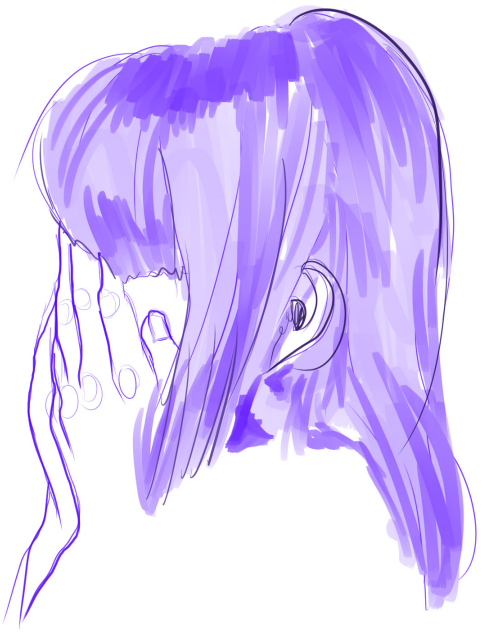
18 TransgenderSG, "Trans healthcare in Singapore", https://transgendersg.com/healthcare.php.

19 Joy Fang, "Support for a Cause Should Not Divide Community: Yaacob", *TODAY*, June 23, 2014, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/support-cause-should-not-divide-community-yaacob?singlepage=true.

was revived in 2016 by church leader Lawrence Khong, the chairman of a 100-strong network of Christian churches. In 2016, a man was fined S$3,500 for threatening to "open fire" on LGBTQ persons in response to a Facebook post about Pink Dot. It was notable that as sexual orientation and gender identity are not recognised or protected under Singapore law, he was fined for threatening, abusive or insulting communication under the Protection from Harassment Act[20] but not for hate speech. In the same year, foreign sponsors were barred from supporting Pink Dot,[21] meaning that multinational companies that had previously contributed to the movement, such as Google, were no longer allowed to do so. This was in spite of some companies' request to participate without being recognised or listed in the event's collateral.[22] The government's choice to continue constraining the LGBTQ community to limit controversy surrounding LGBTQ and other human rights issues was again seen in 2017, when it amended the Public Order Act to bar foreigners from the Speakers' Corner, the site of the Pink Dot event, under the guise of security concerns after terrorist attacks overseas. This action limited the freedom of expression and movement of LBTQ persons and allies: the event was held behind barricades, had a limited size, and required checks of identity cards and body scans,[23] which was traumatising for some transgender and non-binary individuals.

SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

Amid this unsympathetic political and social climate, LBTQ women and transgender men live and navigate the challenges of being queer and/or transgender in Singapore. Inevitably, policies impact individual lives. Discriminatory policies deny same-sex queer women couples the right to access services available to their legally married counterparts. LBTQ women also face prejudice or violence because of their sexuality or gender identity. These lived experiences of discrimination against LBTQ women have hitherto been invisible and undocumented. This report seeks to change that by documenting experiences of discrimination and violence faced by LBTQ women aged 18 and above who had lived in Singapore for more than a year. It thus sheds light on the situation on the ground and reveals the link between the state's discriminatory policies and their material impact on LBTQ women.



20 Xing Hui Kok, "Man Fined $3,500 over 'Open Fire' Online Comment", *The Straits Times*, November 4, 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/man-fined-3500-over-open-fire-comment-online.

21 Yuen Sin, "MHA Says Foreign Sponsors Not Allowed for Pink Dot, or Other Events, at Speakers' Corner", *The Straits Times*, June 7, 2016, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mha-says-foreign-sponsors-not-allowed-for-pink-dot-or-other-events-at-speakers-corner.

22 Alfred Chua, "Foreign Companies' Application to Support Pink Dot Rejected", *TODAY*, June 16, 2017, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/foreign-companies-application-support-pink-dot-rejected.

23 Xing Hui Kok, "Pink Dot Rally to Have Barricades, Security Officers, as Well as Checks of Bags and ID", *The Straits Times*, May 30, 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/pink-dot-rally-to-have-barricades-security-officers-as-well-as-checks-of-bags-and-id.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on evidence gathered to document human rights violations experienced by LBTQ women in Singapore. As such, we viewed the discrimination they face to be systemic, encountered both in the public sphere (workplace, schools, and healthcare facilities) and the private sphere (home and family), where it may escalate to violence and/or abuse. This report articulates how and why these violations take place and who is involved, and has provided women who have lived with violence and discrimination a chance to share their experiences and have them recorded.

INTERVIEWEE SELECTION

A total of 40 interviews were conducted with LBTQ persons of varying ages and ethnicities from April 2014 to January 2015. Participants had to be older than 18 years of age, self-identified as a lesbian or bisexual woman and/or transgender woman or man, and had experienced discrimination and/or violence as a result of their SOGIESC. Only individuals who were residing in Singapore at the time of the study and had been in Singapore for more than a year were interviewed. Foreigners, defined as non-permanent residents and non-citizens but living in Singapore, could not exceed 30% of the sample. Demographic information collected included self-identified sexual orientation and gender identity, age, ethnicity, income, and educational level. We attempted to sample a mix of ethnicities that matched Singapore's sociodemographic distribution. The demographic information of the 40 interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Interviews were also conducted with eight stakeholders from the healthcare, banking, and education sectors as well as faith institutions in order to supplement the information collected from the LBTQ individuals. Stakeholders were individuals who worked in or with groups and institutions that encounter queer women and transgender individuals, and which may be complicit in perpetuating discrimination and violence experienced by LBTQ individuals in Singapore. We also approached representatives of state and non-state institutions who were potential targets for or partners in advocacy, but they were not responsive.

Table 1. Demographic of interviewees

Variable	No. (%)
Sexual orientation	
Lesbian	16 (40.0)
Bisexual	7 (17.5)
Queer	9 (22.5)
Straight	8 (20.0)
Gender identity/expression	
Female	17 (42.5)
Butch	8 (20.0)
Masculine presenting	5 (12.5)
Androgynous	2 (5.0)
Transgender man/ Transmasculine	3 (7.5)
Transgender woman/ Transfeminine	15 (12.5)
Ethnicity	
Chinese	17 (42.5)
Malay	9 (22.5)
Indian	8 (20.0)
Eurasian	3 (7.5)
Other	3 (7.5)

INTERVIEW PROCESS AND PROTOCOLS

A questionnaire was created with the aim of examining violence and discrimination among queer women and transgender men and women located in Singapore. Interviewees were asked to recount their experiences of discrimination and violence in different settings and in their relationships with other individuals, groups, and institutions (e.g. state or non-state service providers). For example, they were asked if they had ever experienced violence and discrimination in the private space of the home, in semi-public spaces such as the workplace and school, and in public spaces (e.g. the street, bus-stop, airport, public toilets, etc). The framing of violence and discrimination as occurring in spaces and through social relationships is crucial, as this provided spatial, temporal, and social modes through which people could remember what had happened to them. The interviewees were also asked about their awareness of state policies that contributed to the discrimination and violence, their coping strategies and support systems, and their outlook for the future. This provided us with important data on help-seeking behaviour as well as the LBTQ individuals' ability to cope given the psychological and emotional stresses that they encountered as a result of violence and discrimination.

A series of protocols was used to standardise the interview process and improve safety for everyone involved in the research. Interviewers were trained and instructed to follow the same interviewer protocol. This included guidance on being aware of their own emotional state during and after the interview, a reminder to stop the interview if any party was unable to continue, and specific instructions on how to conduct the interview. The researchers followed a data security protocol to safely store and transmit information, such as transcripts and voice recordings, to protect the privacy of interviewees. An information sheet was provided to interviewees that informed them about the nature and purpose of the research, our sample population, the confidentiality of their personal data, and the voluntary nature of the research.

Interviewees were recruited via Sayoni's website, social media accounts (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) and personal contacts, and the snowballing method was used to find more participants (e.g. through contacts from interviewees). Interviewees were also sought through other LGBTQ groups in Singapore, with announcements placed on various online group websites and social media accounts.

Interviews were carried out in person as one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth conversations. In some instances, when required, there were two interviewers present. Informed written consent was obtained from all interviewees for limited use of their information and recording of the conversation on voice recorders. Interviewees were told that they were free to withdraw from the study or stop the interview at any time. All interviews took place in public settings such as cafes and restaurants, and voice recordings were transcribed by the research team and other volunteers. Guidelines were provided to transcribers to use a specific format and to remove the real names of individuals and/or institutions from all transcripts. Our interviewer coordinator was in charge of setting up interviews and following up with interviewees and transcribers to monitor for emotional and psychological trauma. Interviewees were given a resource list after each interview containing LGBTQ-friendly and general organisations that could assist them. The core group of researchers was also provided with training and self-care.

To ensure the privacy of interviewees, all transcripts and digital audio files used a coded pseudonym for each interviewee. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the interviewees at all times. A data security protocol for storing data was followed. If data containing personal information had to be transmitted, by hand or through a cloud service, the researcher responsible ensured that the data was protected by at least two levels of encryption or password protection. During the process of report writing, personal identifying information that would have revealed the identity of the interviewee was further removed when necessary, although we made every effort to include relevant contextual information for each individual.

DATA ANALYSIS

As part of data analysis, we coded and analysed more than 90 hours' worth of interview transcripts, using an interview summary matrix we developed to organise information. The template was in table format and

comprised rows and columns, with different types of violence and discrimination listed in the columns, and different sites and perpetrators of violence laid out in rows. This provided a grid for analysing experiences of violence and discrimination at a glance. We also included rows for coping strategies and outlook for the future, and included quotes or references to specific pages in the interview transcripts where more detailed quotes could be obtained.

Key themes quickly emerged once all data from the transcripts had been transferred to the interview summary template. The first theme that became apparent had to do with the identity of the perpetrators of violence: it was consistently clear that two key groups of perpetrators from the interviewees' accounts were their family members and intimate partners. The next major theme that emerged had to do with psychological violence and the stresses and fears associated with disclosing their SOGIESC identity, also known as coming out of the closet. A third set of themes involved discrimination and where the experiences of discrimination had occurred – at the workplace and when using public services (e.g. school, healthcare, or housing). A fourth theme had to do with the experience of being LBTQ in public spaces and how LBTQ individuals consistently encounter violence and discrimination in semi-public online spaces. A fifth theme focused on help-seeking and coping behaviour, while the sixth was about LBTQ individuals' views of the future. Each of these themes then became the starting points for the various chapters of this report.

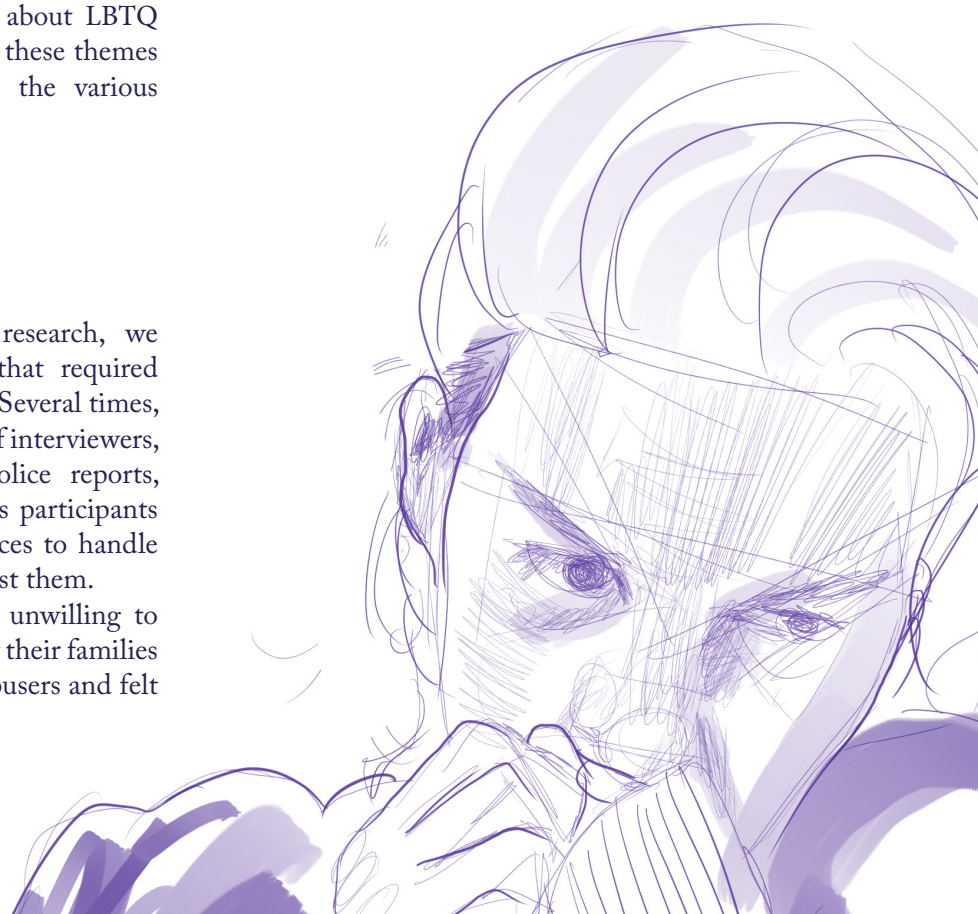
CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

In the process of conducting the research, we encountered some challenging cases that required further assistance and external referrals. Several times, the assistance came from our own pool of interviewers, who accompanied participants for police reports, court dates, and counselling sessions, as participants did not trust mainstream support services to handle their cases without discriminating against them.

There were also people who were unwilling to speak to us for fear of being found out by their families or abusers. Many still lived with their abusers and felt that their movements would be tracked. Others had been 'converted' to heterosexuality through familial social control, forced marriage, religious communities, and/or psychiatric treatment.

We were unable to reach out to LBTQ domestic helpers because of logistical and language barriers that prevented them from contacting us on the one day off they received per month. Moreover, many of the issues domestic helpers face are interlinked with how the state treats domestic workers as a transient and disposable labour force who are not fully entitled to their rights, much less protections as LBTQ people. We were also unable to reach people housed in state services such as prisons, girls' homes, mental health institutions, and long-term hospital care. We had limited outreach to Malay/Muslim communities but attempted to rectify the issue by reaching out to members of a queer Muslim group who were crucial to our outreach. Our outreach was more successful among the LBTQ women who were already out and participating in various facets of civil society. Our email requests to selected government agencies did not receive a response.

In this report, interviewees are referred to using the SOGIESC they self-identified as during the time of the interviews, except in a few instances. When presented, the age of the interviewees is their age when the interview was conducted.



Chapter 4

HOME & FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

Family and familial relationships are often linked to the space of the home and associated with care, shelter, love, and solace. Yet it is not uncommon for domestic violence to be encountered at the hands of a close family member.[1,2] It is this awareness that has resulted in efforts within the international system to ensure gender equality and protection against violence in the family. According to the Yogyakarta Principles, states shall take "all necessary legislative measures to impose appropriate criminal penalties for violence, threats of violence, incitement to violence, and related harassment, based on the sexual orientation or gender identity of any person or group of persons, in all spheres of life, including the family".[3]

In Singapore, where the national ethos emphasises family-centric shared values and a communitarian ideal,[4] ideal family life is, more often than not, maintained by individuals who are expected to perform gender roles and relations that are essential to the survival of the heteronormative family ideal.[5,6] The heteronormative family ideal is defined as heterosexual, comprising a man and a woman who have children within the legal confines of marriage and live together. Divorced spouses, homosexual couples, unwed mothers, singles, and other family structures are not considered a legitimate family nucleus.[7] Family in Singapore, therefore, only counts when it comprises married heterosexual couples and their offspring.[8] This is evident in state policies and laws that promote heteronormativity and privilege heterosexual families, where men and women in heterosexual marriages are likely to receive more state benefits (see Chapter 7, Housing) and where homosexuality continues to be criminalised[9] under Section 377A of the Penal Code.

This chapter documents and explains how violence and discrimination are experienced by LBTQ individuals in the home at the hands of family members who, according to the state's ethos of family

1 James A. Tyner, *Space, Place and Violence: Violence and Embodied Geographies of Race, Sex, and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

2 Mona Domosh and Joni Seager, *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2001).

3 *The Yogyakarta Principles*, http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles-en.

4 B. H. Chua, "Racial-Singaporean: Absence after the Hyphen", *Social Scientist* 24, no. 7/8 (1996): 51–68; see also Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore", in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker et al. (New york and London: Routledge, 1993): 343–364.

5 Natalie Oswin, "The Modern Model Family at Home in Singapore: A queer Geography", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35, no. 2 (2010): 256–68.

6 Kamalini Ramdas, "Women in Waiting? Singledhood, marriage, and Family in Singapore", *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 4 (2012): 832–48.

7 Natalie Oswin, "Sexual Tensions in Modernizing Singapore: The Postcolonial and the Intimate", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 1 (2010): 128–41; see also Oswin, "The Modern Model Family at Home in Singapore".

8 Ramdas, "Women in Waiting?".

9 Kamalini Ramdas, "Contesting Landscapes of Familyhood: Singlehood, the AWARE Saga and Pink Dot Celebrations", in *Changing Landscapes of Singapore: Old Tensions, New Discoveries*, ed. Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho et al., (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013): 109–25.

values, should be the very individuals protecting and caring for them. This chapter provides evidence of how LBTQ lives continue to be fraught with the threat of physical, emotional, psychological, and financial violence at home. The threat of violence comes not from the state in its enforcement of Section 377A but from immediate family members and relatives who believe that homosexuality is wrong and that LBTQ individuals must be punished or 'cured' of their homosexual tendencies. There is a fear of homosexuality as something abnormal, and LBTQ individuals who present as non-conforming in terms of appearance and behaviour, as well as not complying with gender roles and relations, are more vulnerable to violence and discrimination in the family. Young LBTQ individuals are particularly vulnerable at home, as they are financially dependent on their parents and unable to move out of the family home. As such, they are often forced to live with violence and discrimination enacted by adults in the family.

KEY FINDINGS

Five key findings are addressed in this section on violence and discrimination faced by LBTQ individuals in the family: (1) prevalence of psychological violence, (2) prevalence of physical violence, (3) deprivation, (4) sense of familial responsibility and duty, and (5) living in fear in the parental home.

1. Prevalence of psychological violence

LBTQ individuals experience psychological violence in the home in three ways, which are discussed here in order of escalating violence. The first is a less intense experience in which individuals come out, but their coming out is brushed aside or made inconsequential as 'crazy talk', and they are made to feel abnormal. For example, Yvonne, a cisgender lesbian, said that when she tried to come out to her mother, she was called "crazy" and "talking nonsense". Yvonne felt that her mother's response to her coming out was dismissive. Her mother's reaction is not uncommon, as more conservative parents prefer not to discuss issues pertaining to sex or sexuality, seeing them as taboo. Yvonne's coming out made it necessary to bring up the subject of her sexuality – something that many parents still believe is inappropriate and a private matter that does not need to be discussed. From Yvonne's perspective, however, it was important that she come out to her mother because of the close relationship the two shared. Yvonne continued to care for her family and to live with them, but she believed that this care was not reciprocated, given their non-recognition of her sexuality. In the past, Yvonne's partners had spent time with Yvonne and her family, but these individuals were seen as Yvonne's 'friends', making her sexuality invisible.

The second type of psychological violence is perpetrated by homophobic family members and is more damaging than the first. Homophobic family members believe that LBTQ individuals are ill or morally reprehensible and bring shame to their family because of their non-normative sexuality. In such instances, family members may take action to correct the LBTQ individual's non-normative sexuality. Corrective action includes bullying LBTQ individuals with verbal abuse, harassment, and the performance of religious rituals and prayers over the individual to 'correct' her sexuality. Specifically, we documented the following types of psychological violence:

- Harassment in the form of constant phone calls and scolding (e.g. telling the LBTQ individual that they will "go to hell" or that it is "wrong to be butch")
- Verbal abuse
- Made to feel ashamed about their sexuality
- Made to seek reparative therapy, religious or otherwise
- Threat of being disowned by parents

Family life for individuals who experience the second type of psychological violence tends to be emotionally fraught, and the LBTQ individual is made to feel that she is abnormal and a disappointment to her family. This can lead to depression, and the situation can escalate when the home environment does not improve. For example, Aisha's parents forced her to see a religious counsellor. Her brothers harassed her online and threatened to tell her employer about her sexuality and report her to the police. Her brothers also sent threatening texts to her partner. Due to the constant harassment, Aisha felt depressed and suicidal, as if she had lost her family. Similarly, Kalinda's family

When Sarah was 12 in 1993, two people from church went to her home to 'cast demons out' of her, saying that her mother was worried about her. They were in her home from 2pm to 7.30pm. They shouted and prayed at the demons inside her and burnt everything in her room that had a face (posters, books, soft toys, and her cherished handicrafts) on the kitchen stove. Her mother continued to read the Bible with her every day after that.

harassed her at work. They continued calling her even after she had left home, saying that she had brought shame to her family because she lived with a trans man and that she would go to hell. Sarah's family invited two people from the family church to their home to pray over her and 'cast out demons'.

The third type of psychological violence is more damaging than the second and is primarily the result of a strong sense of entrapment that develops when psychological violence at home escalates and the LBTQ individual is unable to move out of the family home. The primary reasons for not moving out are the inability to afford housing (e.g. unable to pay rent or buy their own apartment) and being told by family members that they must not move out before marriage because this would bring shame to the family. When Siti's partner stayed over, Siti was outed by her domestic helper and her parents chased her out, screaming, "Get out of here, you gay swine!" Her parents confronted her multiple times, calling her "gay swine" and "whore". Her mother told her that being unmarried and gay was being sexually promiscuous, while her sister called her "disgusting" and said that what she was doing was wrong. However, her mother became upset when Siti moved out with her partner and shamed her for living outside of the home while being unmarried. Things calmed down when she broke up with her partner and moved home. Consequently, Siti's emotional health was unstable and she had a turbulent relationship with her family, who were concerned about how her sexuality and life dishonoured them in the Malay Muslim community. She blamed herself for not handling it better.

"Stomach, thighs, my neck, yeah. Then my back. So I think I cracked a few ribs. I didn't go to the hospital. Just pack it in lah. Literally packed it in. 'Cause I had a couple of slaps from my mum as well. My dad took his belt and whipped me silly. Somehow, the whipping hurt more than my brothers' beating. Probably because it's from your dad and your mum."

– Amir, who was hit by his family members

LBTQ individuals thus experience a strong sense of entrapment, living with family members who inflict psychological violence with no hope of escape. This sense of entrapment and the inability to extricate oneself from the psychologically violent situation is the third level of psychological violence. In some instances, even when individuals are able to leave, the violence follows them. For example, Jamie said that even after she moved out, her relationship with her father spiralled downwards, and they did not speak to each other for six months. Jamie said that the relationship had since improved, because over the years, she had learnt not to discuss her sexuality with her father. Like Yvonne, Jamie continued to experience the psychological violence of silencing. Similarly, Cris still became upset as an adult when she remembered how she had been treated by her mother, who would say she was going through a phase and called her "irresponsible" for "not turning straight".

There is an expectation that LBTQ individuals can and must change their sexuality. If they are unwilling to change, then steps must be taken to change or 'cure' them of their affliction. In some cases, LBTQ individuals believe that by not changing, they have let their parents down. They struggle with wanting to experience peace at home and having a good relationship with their family members, while also being true to themselves. These personal psychological struggles can result in an unstable family life, and can also result in physical acts of violence when the LBTQ individual is seen as defiant for not making sufficient effort to change their sexuality. However, as discussed in the next section, LBTQ individuals are

Nurdiana came out to her mother in 2012 and was told not to come out to her father. Her mother said this was the worst thing Nurdiana had ever done in her life. Her mother goaded her and said there was no such thing as bisexuality; she had just not found a man yet. Nurdiana suffered from depression due to her parents but was unable to move out since the house was also in her name. Her parents wanted her to go for an exorcism as they believed she was possessed. Not wanting to risk her extended family finding out that she was bisexual, her parents left her out of the Hari Raya family gatherings, treating her as if she did not exist and instead making excuses to the extended family for her absence.

most likely to be vulnerable to physical violence as young people, when they are also more likely to live with their family.

2. Physical violence prevalent in the home: age and trans vulnerabilities

LBTQ individuals are more vulnerable to physical violence and deprivation by a family member when they are younger. The majority of our interviewees experienced these acts of violence as young children and teenagers aged 11 and older. In most cases, the perpetrator was someone in the immediate family (e.g. parent and/or sibling) who lived with the LBTQ individual. The situation is further exacerbated if the perpetrator had displayed violent tendencies prior to the discovery of the LBTQ individual's sexuality and/or displayed addictive behaviour (e.g. alcoholism, drug abuse). Documented acts of physical violence include: being slapped, punched, kicked, pushed, thrown against the wall, and hit with an object or dangerous weapon (e.g. hanger, belt, belt buckle, screwdriver, knife/chopper, cigarette, hot water).

The discovery of the LBTQ individual's non-normative sexuality becomes a trigger for more violence and abuse. For example, Nadia attributed her father's violence to the discovery of her letters to her girlfriend when she was 11. As her father was an alcoholic, Nadia feared for her safety and that of the other members of her family. Similarly, Nic's mother was psychologically unstable and when she found out about Nic's sexuality (she identified as lesbian when she was 13 years old), her mother pulled her hair and punched her to the point where her lip split and bled. Nic's mother would also use wire hangers to whip her and throw things at her when she was in her late teens. Elaine's mother declared that "lesbians are Satanic" and deliberately made things difficult for her. When Elaine was 14 years old, her mother hired a private investigator for about four months to find out if she was a lesbian. Elaine sought her family's help to get her mother to see a counsellor. But when her father broached the topic, her mother hit and scratched him. Elaine's mother continued to be physically violent and verbally abusive. She threw a skateboard at Elaine, hit her, strangled her, and chased her with a chopper. In another incident, Elaine's mother stripped her naked and pushed her out of the house. After each of these incidents, her mother would pretend nothing had happened. Elaine said, "She always beat, then pretend nothing happened, or beat, then buy me something very expensive. Then pretend it never happened."

Trans men and trans women faced extreme experiences of physical violence as young people. We found that their gender and sexual non-conformity was particularly visible when they began cross-dressing. For example, Divya, a trans woman, was hit by her brother at Tekka market – he had come to look for her once he heard about her transition – where he slapped and punched her in public. Divya recounts that her brother told her, "What do you expect when I see my brother tying a sari in Tekka and do prostitution?" Once Divya's trans identity became known to her family, she said her siblings yelled at her, hit her, ostracised her, and gossiped about her. Divya was 16 years old then and lived with her mother and siblings. There was little that she could do, although her mother tried to protect her from her siblings. Eventually, she completed her compulsory National Service and left her family home after that. At the time of the interview, Divya had transitioned and no longer lived with her family, although she had some contact with her relatives.

Unlike Divya, some transgender people have no family support at all. Divya reported that her mother's support was crucial for her survival. In contrast, Ash, a trans man, was asked to leave home when his parents found out about his relationship with his then-girlfriend. Ash was 14 when his girlfriend's mother found out about the relationship and threatened to call the police and report the incident to his school. Eventually, his girlfriend's mother did inform the school, and it kept Ash and his girlfriend apart. Ash said, "I felt a lot of fear at that time. Because my partner at that time, her mother was quite rich and powerful. So, I would be receiving calls, like threats, from her, and she would say things like, 'I'm gonna call the police and tell them what you did to my daughter.'" Ash said he was forced to talk to his parents about his trans identity. "Because I was feeling unsafe, and I thought they would support me. And instead, they were also against me."

In extreme cases, transgender individuals such as Sheila, a trans woman, was beaten by her father for being too 'soft'. Sheila was so badly beaten up that

Kalinda had a physically, emotionally, and financially abusive relationship with her family that worsened when she was outed by her sisters. One night, her sister disclosed her sexuality to her mother after she refused to give her money for cigarettes. Her mother slapped her and told her father despite Kalinda's desperate pleading. She had been close to her father, and he had never hit her before this incident. Her father went into the room and said, "You're a lesbian? You're a fucking lesbian", and punched her. She begged for him to stop, but he continued. He punched her and kicked her in the groin until she urinated. Even though her father knew that she had a previous skull fracture, he held her head and banged it against the wall repeatedly. Kalinda left home at 4am, taking her certificates and a few pieces of clothing, to live with her partner. Even after she had left, her family harassed her at work, shaming her for leaving home and living with a trans man, telling her she would go to hell. At one point, her mother and sisters bumped into her partner and attacked him in public, pulling off his shirt. Kalinda said they pushed him "like a dog", causing an injury that required medical treatment.

"He beat me up so badly, I was in hospital for one-and-a-half months. After that, the government straightaway sent me to the children's home. When the paramedics came… my auntie thought I was going to die in the house, so she called for the ambulance. And the paramedics asked how many people had beaten me up. Can you believe? I was so badly beaten, I didn't have the white in my eyes, my hands were red and swollen, when I was nine years old. I was beaten by a monster."

– Sheila, whose father abused her

she had to be hospitalised for a month and a half. Her father threw her against a wall, burned her with cigarettes, and locked her in a dark room for extended periods of time. In her teens, Sheila ran away from home to escape because her mother was not able to intervene. Sheila ended up working as a sex worker at age 16.

Trans individuals are often forced into coming out while transitioning, and have to contend with the added hardship of violence and threats to personal safety on top of their existing struggles with their identity. They are often forced to leave home at a young age and may need to find work without proper educational qualifications. For many, this means living with poor employment and financial security, and some need to turn to sex work in order to make a living.

3. Deprivation

Many LBTQ individuals experience deprivation by their families when their non-normative sexuality is discovered. We found three kinds of deprivation. The first is when parents or family members force LBTQ individuals to leave home. For example, Jyoti was asked to leave home when she came out to her parents. However, she made a decision not to leave because she needed shelter and for her parents to pay for her education. As a result, her movements were restricted, and she was locked out of her home if she returned late. Eventually, Jyoti had to leave three months after coming out, as it had become unsafe for her after her father threatened to kill her.

The second deprivation is when LBTQ individuals have no choice but to remain in the home and find their movements curtailed. Belinda, who remained at home after coming out, had her movements restricted by her parents. They grounded her and would not allow her to see her girlfriend. Her mother would turn off the lights in her room as though she were not there. She also entered Belinda's bedroom and threw out all her belongings in trash bags, perhaps trying to erase her existence from the home.

The third is being deprived of access to family members. LBTQ individuals experienced isolation from family members or were not allowed access to some members of their family. For example, Nic was made to leave Hong Kong where her family was based. She stayed in a boarding hostel for a year in Singapore, where her family was originally from. Her mother wanted to keep Nic apart from her then-girlfriend and also did not want anyone to know about Nic's sexuality, as this would bring shame to the family. Nic was separated from her sisters when she moved to Singapore. Like Nic, who was deprived of the right to live with her sisters, Aisha was denied the right to see her nephew and was left out of some family functions because of her sexuality. LBTQ individuals thus become excluded from family life and isolated from members of their family, particularly young people like nephews, nieces, and younger siblings. In

Hari, a trans man, grew up with a physically violent mother who worked as a police officer. His mother would verbally abuse him and his sister, and hit him with a belt buckle. On one occasion, she threw a chopper at him. Whenever their injuries were severe enough to be noticed, his mother forced him and his sister to stay home from school. She would also beat him if he and his sister asked for money. When he fought back at 16, his mother pinned him down, broke his spectacles, and punched his ear until he bled. He was forced to leave the house with his sister and move in with his girlfriend's family although the relationship was strained.

Dee's case, the brother of her partner's late husband threatened to take away their child when he found out that Dee and her partner were together.

The situation at home often became so untenable that these individuals had no choice but to move out. Like Jyoti, Sarah left home because life with her mother had become unbearable and dangerous after she came out. However, in such instances, the decision to move out can result in longer-term consequences for LBTQ individuals. The cost of renting or purchasing a place to live is exorbitant in Singapore. When LBTQ individuals decide to move out without sufficient savings, this can lead to financial insecurity and being forced to leave school earlier and begin work in order to live independently. Sarah, for example, said that she was unable to own a home and continued to pay rent. She was less successful in terms of her career than she could have been, as she had been forced to leave home at 22 and had to take whatever jobs she could find to pay for rent and monthly expenses. She had to move from place to place and lived out of boxes, constantly ready to leave, as her lease could potentially end at any time.

4. Familial responsibility and duty

The psychological health and well-being of LBTQ individuals are negatively affected when they repress their sexuality and cannot live their lives freely at home even after coming out. This repression stems from a strong sense of familial responsibility and duty to care. Individuals are forced to keep their sexuality hidden or pretend to 'become straight' to keep the peace at home. Life at home can become strained to the point that LBTQ individuals are estranged from their families. For example, after Grace came out, her parents had a brother follow her because they believed she was "mixing with the wrong company". They pressured her to change her appearance and socialise more with men. They refused to accept her sexual identity even after she had come out. Grace was financially responsible for her family, and she had a strong sense of filial piety. She could not build a life for herself because her family did not want her to continue her relationship with her girlfriend. Similarly, Valerie's relationship with her partner ended because a family member could not accept the relationship. Although the partner's mother had come to accept the relationship, the partner's brother could not, and there were constant fights at home that made it very difficult for them to continue their relationship. Valerie and her partner found it draining, and they "called it quits" even though they still had feelings for each other.

5. Living in fear at home

LBTQ individuals related that they lived in constant fear due to threats from family members to throw them out of the home or physically hurt them. Some were harassed by family members while at their workplace, sometimes with threats to out them to their employers. They were unable to be themselves at home without risking negative consequences. Jyoti's family threatened to kill her because of the shame she had brought on the family. Jyoti said her father "played with her head", making her feel so emotionally drained that she began having suicidal thoughts. Jyoti lived in fear for a long time before she moved out, constantly experiencing threats from her father. Similarly, Elaine said, "Yeah, it's damn scary. Even now. I am just damn scared. You know every time when I go home, is she going to be, like, sitting in the living room, is she going to say something about my hair, is she going to say something about my clothes, then sometimes I even have to go to extra effort to wear this out, but then I have to change outside, you know? It's very tiring. I hate doing that. I cannot... I don't like that I cannot be myself at home. I don't like that I cannot leave my house dressing the way I want."

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

LBTQ individuals are frequently forced to live with violence and discrimination in the family because they cannot afford to move out. A sense of duty to the family and a desire to keep the peace at home stop them from coming out. The need to keep their identities hidden from their parents also makes home life very stressful. The fear that they may be punished also forces many LBTQ individuals to keep their sexuality hidden, and this negatively impacts their psychological and emotional well-being. Those who have not come out

must live a double life and keep their sexuality hidden. Family life at home becomes strained over the longer term for these individuals, as they are forced to hide their identity from their parents and siblings.

Coming out, while emancipatory for LBTQ individuals, can be challenging and dangerous. Young people and transgender individuals are particularly vulnerable. They are more likely to experience physical, verbal and psychological violence in the home. They are also likely to experience deprivation or live in fear of deprivation as their family members often threaten to throw them out of the house or cause harm to them or their partners (e.g. threats to kill, threats to inform employers, constant harassment). Those who are able to leave their homes do so at the expense of their education and future financial security. Many are forced to begin work early, and this means they are often employed in lower-paying jobs because they lack sufficient qualifications for better-paying ones.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enact laws and policies to protect the safety of LBTQ individuals. LBTQ individuals must have the right to live free from all forms of violence and discrimination.
- Repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code to ensure LGBTQ citizens are treated equally before the law and Constitution.
- Provide an LBTQ advocate at state-run institutions who is sensitive to the needs and particular experiences of LBTQ individuals when they report incidents of domestic violence (e.g. police, family services).
- Provide sensitivity training for social workers and shelters to counsel and advise LBTQ persons, especially young people as well as transgender and gender non-conforming persons who are more vulnerable to violence from family members.
- Provide capacity-building for all state and non-state actors (including but not limited to the police and service providers) who may encounter LBTQ cases, to deepen their knowledge of LBTQ people's problems and rights.

Chapter 5

SEXUAL VIOLENCE & INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a serious human rights problem with both short- and long-term consequences for a survivor's physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health. Whether sexual violence occurs in the context of an intimate partnership, within the larger family or community structure, or during national conflict, it is a deeply violating and painful experience for the survivor.[1]

Sexual violence, or assault, occurs on the basis of gender, where women experience inordinate levels of violence, with 35% (or one out of three) of women experiencing intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence at least once in their life. Globally, 38% of women face sexual violence from an intimate partner.[2] Yet there are particular intersectional experiences that make women particularly vulnerable – sexual orientation and gender identity, visibility as a gender non-conforming and/or trans individual, poverty, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, nationality, and disability, among others. In the United States, a 2010 report showed that the lifetime prevalence of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner was extremely high in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, with 43.8% of lesbian women and 61.1% of bisexual women reporting experiencing this violence, compared to 35% of heterosexual women.[3] In its report on violence against LBT women in Asia, OutRight Action International identified two key findings on sexual violence: (1) greater visibility of non-conforming sexual orientation and gender identity/expression resulted in greater frequency of violence against LBT people in Asia, including sexual violence; and (2) sexual violence against LBT people in Asia is overwhelmingly perpetrated by known individuals, the majority of whom were heterosexual, cisgender men.[4]

This chapter documents and explores how sexual violence is experienced by LBTQ people in Singapore in the family, at school, at work, in social settings, with state actors, and with intimate partners. In particular, it will explore intimate partner violence (IPV), which includes sexual violence as well as physical and psychological violence. The chapter will also explore the relevant protections available to LBTQ people.

The introduction to the Yogyakarta Principles recognises that "human rights violations targeted toward persons because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity constitute a global and entrenched pattern of serious concern. They include extrajudicial killings, torture and ill-treatment, sexual assault and rape, invasions of privacy, arbitrary detention, denial of employment and education opportunities, and serious discrimination in

1 World Health Organization, *World report on violence and health*, http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/924154615_eng.pdf;jsessionid=6EAC510EA204192415B1292A491ED8DE?sequence=1.

2 World Health Organization, "Violence against women", http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women.

3 National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation*, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_sofindings.pdf.

4 OutRight Action International, *Violence: Through the Lens of Lesbians, Bisexual Women and Trans People in Asia*, https://www.outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/LBT_ForUpload0614.pdf.

relation to the enjoyment of other human rights".[5] This is evidenced in research on LBTQ individuals worldwide.[6] Furthermore, the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 highlights that: "Everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics, has the right to state protection from violence, discrimination, and other harm, whether by government officials or by any individual or group".[7] LBTQ people not only have the right to freedom from sexual violence but also have the right to access protections and justice from the state for such violations.

Sexual violence is broadly defined to include: sexual taunts, lewd gestures, molest including groping, touching and/or pinching of private parts, forced oral sex, rape including penetration with foreign objects and digital penetration, threats of rape, and rape, which are discussed here in order of escalating violence.[8,9]

In Singapore, protections for sexual violence are located in the Penal Code and Women's Charter,[10] which criminalise various sexual violations for women: rape (Section 375), sexual penetration by a foreign object (Section 376), outrage of modesty (Section 354), insult of modesty (Section 354), sexual penetration of a minor (Section 376A), and sexual grooming of minors under 16 years of age (Section 376E). The Protection Against Harassment Act[11] – which was established to protect individuals who are not legally related from physical and online harassment, distress, and stalking – allows victims to seek protection via a protection order. It is not clear that these laws explicitly protect individuals from sexual violence and harassment perpetrated on the basis of non-conforming SOGIESC.

Furthermore, the Women's Charter[12] does not explicitly protect people in LBTQ relationships. It is limited to those in familial relationships and spouses or ex-spouses of the opposite gender (Section 64), allowing them to seek protection via the Family Court system. Partner violence can often be isolating, devastating and bidirectional, have devastating effects on a victim's physical, emotional and sexual health, and be highly disruptive for its victims. These effects can have short- to long-term impact, and it can take victims years to recover from them, should they even be able to recognise and seek assistance.

OutRight Action International's 2014 report[13] identified that the primary perpetrators of LBTQ partner violence include same-sex partners, casual dating partners, male heterosexual cisgender partners of lesbian and bisexual women, and others, including cisgender male partners of transgender persons. In addition, lesbian partners who experienced same-sex partner violence attributed the violence to their partners' jealousy and possessiveness, which they said was exacerbated by isolation and fractured relationships with family and friends due to their sexual orientation. Violence from male cisgender partners of lesbian and bisexual women often included physical, verbal, and sexual assaults to denigrate a victim's sexual orientation.

Particular factors in LBTQ relationships make it difficult to access assistance, especially factors such as class, race, disability, gender identity, social stigma, discriminatory policies, and laws preventing access to appropriate legal protective services and healthcare. In particular, there is a dearth of LBTQ-sensitive counselling and intervention, with very few state and voluntary welfare organisation services available for assistance.

In this research, we identified high levels of sexual violence and discrimination against LBTQ individuals, as well as violence within intimate relationships. Many

5 *The Yogyakarta Principles*, http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles-en.

6 OutRight Action International, *Violence*.

7 *The Yogyakarta Principles plus 10*, http://yogyakartaprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A5_yogyakartaWEB-2.pdf.

8 WHO, *World report on violence and health*.

9 AWARE Singapore, "Survey: 1 in 3 young people have faced sexual violence; few seek or receive help", http://www.aware.org.sg/2015/03/survey-1-in-3-young-people-have-faced-sexual-violence-few-seek-or-receive-help/.

10 Women's Charter, Singapore, Cap 353 (2009 Rev Ed), https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/WC1961#pr12-.

11 Protection from Harassment Act, Singapore, Cap 256A (2015 Rev Ed), https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act-Rev/PHA2014/Published/20150525?DocDate=20150525.

12 Women's Charter.

13 OutRight Action International, *Violence*.

incidents were not reported to the state and hence have not been previously documented.

KEY FINDINGS

The five key findings of this chapter were: (1) punitive and corrective sexual violence was committed on the basis of non-conforming SOGIESC, (2) sexual violence was mostly perpetrated by men known to survivors, (3) LBTQ minors were vulnerable to sexual violence and IPV, (4) social isolation was exacerbated by IPV, and (5) heteronormative stereotypes contributed to physical and psychological violence in LBTQ relationships.

1. Punitive and corrective sexual violence committed against non-conforming women

Of the 40 interviewees we spoke to, 24 had experienced sexual violence of at least one kind in their lives. More than half of them had experienced sexual violence as a minor.

Many of the masculine-identified or butch interviewees we spoke to shared that they had started dressing in a masculine or gender non-conforming manner at a young age and experienced sexual assault at the same time. Existing literature points to a prevalence of sexual violence against butch and gender non-conforming LBTQ people as a means to control and correct them, especially when they were viewed as a threat to existing norms of masculinity.[14,15] When Chandra was 11 years old in the late '90s, her neighbour watched her get dressed and would force his fingers into her. She did not tell anyone until she was 20. Amir, a trans man, would spend time with his brother's friends to be "one of the boys", until one day, they got him drunk and gang-raped him – he was 14 years old at the time. He never told anybody because he felt guilty and ashamed for drinking alcohol as a Muslim and being gay. Debbie, an androgynous lesbian, came out to her male colleague. He later spiked her drink with Rohypnol (a date rape drug) and raped her that same night. All three perpetrators were known to our interviewees from their work or friend networks and used sexually violent acts as a means of control over these individuals in the short term.

Sexual assault was sometimes perpetrated by family members and people within extended family networks. The victim-survivors are often 'outed' against their consent or were visibly out to their family members. Shahina, a trans woman, was sexually abused by her father and uncles as a child for being soft and effeminate. She was taken to a children's home. Years later, when visiting her father when he was sick in hospital, he commented on her big breasts and "big backside", and asked to see her alone to treat her like "his third girlfriend". The episode was retraumatising for Shahina, who thought she had moved past the period of abuse. One of our interviewees shared a secondhand story that a butch lesbian she knew was raped by her father during her teenage years when he found out about her sexual orientation. In such cases, sexual assault and abuse may be used over a period of time to control, shame, punish, or correct individuals and their non-conforming sexual orientation or gender identity.

LBTQ women are particularly vulnerable in public spaces, especially in contexts where their non-conforming SOGIESC is visible. Sheila was targeted in public by two men who followed her home from her place of work and demanded sex because, as she said, "they think transgenders are for sex and they will suck cock". When she refused, they beat her up. Divya, a straight trans woman, was at a club when her drink was spiked and she was taken to a hotel room and raped. The front office told her later that four or five men were involved. She did not report the incident to the police, as her friend who had also been drugged and raped was told by the police that "it was her own fault". Divya said that she was targeted by the men because they thought they could get away with it more easily: "Because they know something about me, then they say 'Oh this one really can do.' Because they think we are easy targets." Stereotypes and assumptions about LBTQ women are dangerous, as they exacerbate this vulnerability, producing health risks and long-term psychological trauma.

14 Amanda Lock Swarr, "Paradoxes of Butchness: Lesbian Masculinities and Sexual Violence in Contemporary South Africa", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 961-986.

15 OutRight Action International, *Violence*.

Gina, a 17-year-old bisexual student, was seen by classmates kissing her girlfriend in school. She and her girlfriend were filmed by classmates and reported to school authorities, who, when the video went viral, forced Gina and her girlfriend to confess what they had done, apologise to the teachers and withdraw from the school. The school failed to report that they were filmed without their consent, which would have constituted a sexual violation, nor did they apprehend the students who filmed Gina and her partner. Gina shared that she felt "helpless, terrified, fearful... that it would harm her chances of doing well and staying in school". Here, intimacy between two women is viewed as deviance from school rules – and obscured a sexual violation that had taken place. Even though the video was circulated and reported in the news, the police did not conduct an investigation of it. Consequently, Gina dropped out of school, and continued to experience flashbacks and emotional distress.

2. Sexual violence mostly perpetrated by men known to survivors

Of the 21 interviewees who spoke about their experiences of violence with intimate partners, nine disclosed that they had experienced sexual violence from a partner, an ex-partner, or a date. Sexual violence from male partners of LBTQ people is often perpetrated because of jealousy and/or revenge and can be accompanied by emotional violence that denigrates the LBTQ person's status, gender identity, gender presentation, and/or sexual orientation. Jaya, a queer-identified bisexual in her late 20s, had a male partner who flew into rages, shouting and calling her "disgusting" and "shameful". When Jaya dressed in a masculine manner, he shamed her for wanting to be like a man. He sexually assaulted her on multiple occasions, once until her vagina tore and bled, intoxicated her, and forced her to have anal sex "because oral (sex) is for lesbians" and "she owed him due to her sexual past". When she tried to address it with her partner, he told her that she was imagining it and could not remember the incidents properly.

In another case, Nurdiana used to dress in a masculine style and put on a fierce front when she was younger. She recalled being raped by her boyfriend and his friend because they were high on drugs. She felt that "there's nobody who wants me now", and fell into depression and engaged in self-destructive behaviour like drinking, drugs, and unprotected sex in order to cope. Nurdiana did not report the rape, saying that "I didn't report it because I thought I asked for it". Sexual violence from male partners can become a means to control an LBTQ person's sexuality, causing them to live in fear, shame, and isolation, violating their right to live free from harassment and violence. Furthermore, the fact that bisexual persons can be victims of violence due to both their sexual orientation and their gender identity is often misunderstood by health professionals and erased by the LGBTQ community and associated healthcare resources.

> **"He became very emotionally distant and he wouldn't reach out for me. When I cried, he'd just like, 'Yeah. You deserved it. You deserve to cry. You deserve to feel the kind of pain that I feel.'"**
>
> *– Jaya on her male partner, after he learnt about her relationships with women*

3. LBTQ minors' vulnerability to sexual violence and intimate partner violence

Of the nine interviewees who shared their experiences of sexual violence, more than half of them were between the ages of 12 and 16 when they first experienced it, with several of them experiencing these violations as minors and from family and/or intimate partners.

An interviewee, Cris, shared that when she was 13 years old, she went on a date with an older lesbian who later forcibly penetrated her with a dildo. She said that she "wasn't in the right frame of mind to be saying no" and did not tell anyone what had happened because of the trouble she would get into. The shame of being drunk as well as having sex that was considered immoral led her to hide the fact that she was sexually penetrated as a minor. In another case, Belinda talked to us about her first relationship at 14 with her lesbian partner who would lock her up at home. Her partner often insisted on fisting and scratching against Belinda's consent, which caused Belinda frequent discomfort and vaginal tears and bleeding. Belinda tried to talk to her partner about this, but her partner often said she "was drunk and it was in the moment". The pattern continued until Belinda broke up with her partner a year later. Belinda said her abusive relationship was a "learning experience" for her. The lack of education on non-normative sexual acts in LBTQ relationships and what constituted a healthy relationship, one in which a partner asks for consent, was a common complaint among victims.

In another interview, Sahar, a masculine-identified

lesbian in her mid-twenties, was in an abusive relationship with her first girlfriend at 15. Sahar's girlfriend socially isolated her, threatened to kill herself on multiple occasions and would become uncontactable. Sahar was uncomfortable with public displays of affection as she was not out yet, and her girlfriend used this to control and frighten her. Sahar's partner would force her to have sex in public places and blame Sahar for seducing her. As a result, Sahar came to expect this behaviour from her future relationships, and said she wished that sexuality education in school had created awareness about recognising situations like this. Those who identified sexual violence with intimate partners below the age of 16 tended not to report it at all because of the stigma associated with being LBTQ, a fear of getting into trouble, or a lack of awareness about what constituted a violent relationship.

4 . Social isolation in LBTQ intimate partner violence

From our research, 21 of 40 interviewees disclosed that they had experienced IPV, suffering from physical, sexual and emotional violence that happened for a variety of reasons. These included verbal denigration, beating, kicking, slapping, stabbing, scratching, biting, choking, throwing objects, and infliction of physical pain. Four interviewees spoke about perpetrating violence in their relationships; two were also IPV victims. In addition, violent partners inflicted emotional violence, which occurred simultaneously or led up to physical and sexual violence, and often had longer-lasting effects on its victims.

Social isolation is a key factor in exacerbating the effects of LBTQ partner violence, especially for those with disabilities, low visibility, and lack of social capital. Siti, a feminine-presenting lesbian in her early 30s, was physically and emotionally abused by her first partner. This happened while they resided in a rented apartment together. When Siti and her partner disagreed, their fights would turn physical. Her partner would often grab her and throw her against the wall and beat her multiple times, taking objects like standing fans and slamming them against Siti. Siti was accused of cheating, restricted from socialising with people, and stalked and beaten when she initiated a break-up. Whenever she confronted her partner about the abuse, her partner would gaslight her and send her hundreds of text messages with the words: 'slut', 'bitch' and other obscenities. Siti came to blame herself, saying: "I allowed myself to be defined by how my partners treat me. You become what she says you are. In a way, it was me who excessively gave over my power and self-worth to them. It has to be something wrong with me."

Jaya further shared that she thought that she would not find another romantic partner. Because her partner fought with her violently about most of her close friendships with women, especially lesbian women, she stopped associating with her friends altogether. As seen in the experiences of Jaya, Belinda, Ash, and Sahar, belittling and degradation of self and people that they spent time with were key components in LBTQ IPV. This particular kind of abuse served to separate these LBTQ survivors from their family, friends, and support networks when support was already scarce.

Generally, LBTQ people fear reporting abuse since they do not want their identity exposed and prefer to avoid ridicule or harassment by police officers, social workers, and counsellors. Very often, their LBTQ relationship itself may be deemed as the problem and they may be asked to terminate their relationships in order to solve the issues. As mentioned, the Protection from Harassment Act does not explicitly protect them or their right to live lives free from fear and harassment.

It is worth noting that while the police do respond to claims of domestic violence, the Women's Charter only extends protection to women suffering from domestic violence perpetrated by family members and spouses, or former spouses. The personal protection order available under the Women's Charter would not be applicable in cases of same-sex partner domestic violence, such as that experienced by Kalinda, as she and Hari were not legally married.

In cases of intimate partner violence, lack of police sensitivity to the same-sex relationship may exacerbate the issue. For Kalinda and Hari, the police were called to investigate a complaint associated with their domestic dispute. Instead of speaking to Kalinda privately, the police asked her in front of Hari if she wanted to continue with the report and warned her that she could be charged if she made a false report.

Kalinda, a young bisexual woman, had experienced physical violence from her family and had sought a protection order against them. She reported that her counsellors saw her relationship as the problem and encouraged her to break up with her partner to reconcile with her parents. However, she had also experienced regular beatings at the hands of said partner, trans man Hari, whom she had been living with since she left home. As he was a pre-operative trans man, they were not able to marry. Their unmarried status meant that she could not avail herself of a protection order against domestic abuse, the way she had with her family. Her partner would ask her to strip naked so that she would not escape and would beat her. She was socially isolated, restricted from contacting friends, and her Facebook and other online activity was monitored daily, as Kalinda's partner feared that she would leave him. Many of her friends from her family's church had distanced themselves from her when she told them about her partner because they felt it was a sin. When Kalinda fought back and threatened to file a personal protection order against Hari, he dismissed it as he knew that such an order would not be enforceable against him. On one occasion when her landlord called the police on them for making too much noise, the police did not question her separately. Kalinda said she was too scared to say anything in front of her partner. She was also afraid to leave Hari, as she would have nowhere to go and nobody to turn to, saying, "My partner is my community. Without him, what else do I have?" She also shared that he had no one else besides her – his reason for controlling and beating her was that he was afraid she would leave him. Growing up as a racial minority, having a fractured relationship with her family, and spending most of her time working two jobs, Kalinda believed she would not find friends or a sense of home and community outside of her relationship with him.

Without assistance from the police about how to secure protection, Kalinda decided against making the police report and told the officers that everything was fine so as to not make the situation worse. To eliminate such ambiguities in domestic violence cases, changes to the legal framework are needed to recognise committed same-sex partnerships.

Additionally, given the dearth of understanding of LBTQ relationships in the public sphere, first responders like the police may be unable to address complaints of intimate partner violence in same-sex relationships. This may severely and negatively impact a victim's willingness to report and seek assistance. Due to the lack of legal authority to intervene in some situations, as well as inadequate training to understand the LGBTQ community and mediate between LBTQ partners, police officers may leave LBTQ victims of IPV to resolve these matters on their own, which can lead them to feel even more isolated and alone in their struggles. Without clear action from first responders, perpetrators may be encouraged to continue socially isolating and abusing their partners.

LBTQ people in violent relationships can face added risks of social isolation if they are not out, or have severed ties with homophobic or transphobic friends or family members. Being part of a minority racial group, having uncertain immigration status, and having a disability or other intersectional identities can further exacerbate this isolation even within existing LGBTQ networks, causing many LBTQ people in relationships to refer to their partner as their community. Unable to access assistance, protection, and mediation, LBTQ people in abusive relationships can become suicidal or violent.

5. Heteronormative dynamics of physical and psychological violence in LBTQ relationships

Heteronormative gender dynamics in relationships can be the cause of IPV among LBTQ persons, especially when there are gendered expectations that one partner (sometimes the more masculine or butch partner) is expected to provide financially for the other, and that the other (sometimes more feminine) partner is expected to perform more emotional and sexual labour in the relationship. While this is not always the case, a stereotypical perspective of butch-femme dynamics may impact understandings of LBTQ relationships, with the common misunderstanding that butch or masculine partners are more violent or aggressive. Instead, both the literature and research has shown that IPV can often be bidirectional, relational, and built up over long periods of time in resource-poor environments.

Aisha, a masculine-presenting lesbian, related that her partner had untreated borderline personality disorder and threatened her to stab her with a knife, until Aisha became afraid that she would get stabbed in her sleep. Her ex also withheld paying back money that Aisha had lent her, saying it was considered 'rent' for the years they had shared a place together, causing Aisha to fall into debt. However, Aisha recognised the perception that the stereotypically feminine partner is less likely to be considered as the perpetrator even when she assaults the more masculine partner: "Outside, we can quarrel, and she can be physical, but it will not look like physical violence, 'cause she's quite small."

In another case, Grace, a butch woman in her 40s, shared that her partners "expect certain things that they think a normal man will provide" because of her gender expression. As the more masculine partner, an ex-partner expected her to provide housing and financially support them. For Nic, a butch in her 20s, one of her partners was constantly financially dependent on her, expecting her to pay for her transport, meals, and daily expenditure, which usually cost Nic about S$200 a week. When Nic tried to talk to her partner about being more financially independent, her partner would get angry, argue, and escalate the situation, causing much emotional and financial stress for Nic. She recalled two incidents in which these fights resulted in her being pushed into a heavy glass door at McDonald's, where she sustained bruises, and being dragged by the collar for 20 minutes until there were abrasions on her neck. Nic said that she felt trapped in the situation. She said, "So if I don't want to give her money to spend, then she'll find it somewhere else. And she probably used her feminine seductive ways to get her money." Afraid that her partner would leave her, Nic continued to stay in the relationship for two years. With unstable family relationships, Nic was afraid of being cut off and endured the abuse. She said after the break-up that her friends did not know anything about it and she

When Amir was 23, he was with a girlfriend who maxed out his credit cards and was abusive to him: "There were times where she would just take whatever that she can reach out her hand to and smack me with it. Foldable chairs, tower fans. There was one time we fought so bad that the computer, the keyboard went into the monitor screen, my drumset had holes, my cymbals flew out of the window." She once broke Amir's finger. Amir was constantly in debt. When his abusive girlfriend met someone online, Amir gave her money to visit the other woman in Austria, but this woman broke up with the girlfriend soon after, and Amir again spent all his money to bring her back to Singapore. When she found out Amir had another girlfriend by then, she "beat the crap" out of Amir with a helmet, breaking his nose. The one time Amir stopped his ex-girlfriend from hitting him, he ended up hitting her and not being able to stop. "She had a cut on her face, she fell against the floor, and I continued hitting her, I kicked her, I just didn't stop. I couldn't stop", he said. Amir "got scared" and "didn't stop her after that", patiently enduring his girlfriend's abuse.

chose not to tell them. Isolation, as discussed earlier, can result in victims enduring abuse longer than they should. In cases with butch partners, the isolation can be exacerbated because of their community's expectations that they are stronger and can withstand the abuse.

Sharif, a transmasculine person in his early 20s, said his ex-partner punched and shoved him during a fight. He broke up with her soon after because he felt "degraded and emasculated". Acknowledging abuse, let alone reporting abuse, can be a traumatising experience for gender non-conforming people, as they may experience gender dysphoria. There remains an urgent need to be sensitive to these complex and intersectional experiences.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

LGBTQ people remain vulnerable to corrective and punitive sexual violence, especially from family members and partners, at all ages. These incidents of sexual violence can occur once or multiple times in their life, from one or multiple perpetrators, and have devastating impacts on their physical, sexual, and psychological health. Without specific resources to address corrective and punitive sexual violence against LBTQ people, unaddressed physical and psychological health issues can drastically influence their lives and life choices, including changing, hiding, or erasing their SOGIESC as a defence mechanism to protect themselves from further sexual violence, socially isolating themselves, and/or complying with a forced heterosexual relationship or marriage. These situations are often exacerbated by conditions that make it difficult to move out and/or seek refuge elsewhere, and they face homelessness and poverty should they attempt to do so at a young age. The violence is most often perpetrated by male individuals known to the LBTQ survivors through work, social, and family networks; almost one-third of the sexual violence faced by LBTQ people in this study came from partners. This illustrates a clear need for further education and sensitivity training for men, especially those with LBTQ family members, colleagues, and partners.

Furthermore, interviewees' narratives revealed the vulnerability of LBTQ minors to IPV and sexual violence, especially in first relationships with older partners. In the absence of legal protections, there are few avenues to report such violations that are sensitive to their lives and issues. These negative conditions can further extend the duration of and exacerbate the abuse and result in isolation and trauma. Many interviewees said that they thought this was the nature of LBTQ lives. This demonstrates a clear need for the state to intervene to protect LBTQ people from sexual violence and IPV enacted at both state and individual levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Institute sensitivity training for first responders of sexual violence experienced by people of non-conforming SOGIESC.
- Expand the Protection from Harassment Act and domestic violence laws to be gender neutral so as to include LBTQ people in protections against physical and psychological violence.
- Include LGBTQ-sensitive sexuality education as upstream interventions at secondary and tertiary school levels such that sexual violence against LBTQ children and minors is reduced and/or prevented.
- Include sensitivity training for healthcare professionals, social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists that pays specific attention to the dynamics of LBTQ women in violent intimate relationships, not framing the relationship itself as the root cause of an issue.
- Increase awareness of affordable and accessible mental health and well-being resources for LBTQ people through public health campaigns.
- Develop specific abuser-targeted programmes for abusive LBTQ partners to access resources on anger management, healthy communication, and mental healthcare.

Chapter 6

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

INTRODUCTION

The psychological well-being of an individual is believed to comprise several factors, including self-acceptance, having positive relations with others, autonomy, and environmental mastery, namely the ability to choose or create suitable environments.[1] An individual's identity, such as their gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, may affect their psychological well-being, depending on the individual's self-acceptance and societal acceptance of the person. The level of the individual's psychological functioning may further affect their self-esteem, life satisfaction, and level of psychological distress.[2] For LBTQ people, their SOGIESC is one of the facets of their identity. When the person's LBTQ identity is not accepted by themselves and others, this has implications for their psychological well-being.

It has been established that negative societal beliefs or stigma surrounding being LBTQ, in terms of SOGIESC, may lead to prejudicial attitudes. These attitudes may subsequently result in discriminatory and violent behaviour towards LBTQ people, in terms of physical and emotional abuse and exclusion. Alongside these beliefs held by others, LBTQ people themselves may adopt negative societal attitudes towards homosexuality as internalised homophobia. The internalisation of societal attitudes, together with the perceived discrimination from others, may add to the stressors surrounding coming out to themselves and others.[3] In addition to gender identity and sexual orientation, the gender expression of the individual is also thought to be associated with increased psychological distress, particularly when one is gender non-conforming.[4]

Stigmatising beliefs and discriminatory behaviour experienced by the LBTQ person are associated with higher levels of psychological distress, suicidal thoughts and mental health issues, including major depression, anxiety disorders, and alcohol and drug dependency issues.[5] The individual's self-esteem and quality of life may also be affected[6] when the prejudicial events are experienced along with social isolation, having limited access to coping resources, or managing multiple

1 Carol D. Ryff, "Happiness Is Everything, or Is It? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-being", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 6 (1989): 1069-1081.

2 Michael T. Schmitt et al., "The Consequences of Perceived Discrimination for Psychological Well-being: A Meta-analytic Review", *Psychological Bulletin* 140, no. 4 (2014): 921.

3 Keren Lehavot and Jane M. Simoni, "The Impact of Minority Stress on Mental Health and Substance Use among Sexual Minority Women", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 79, no. 2 (2011): 159.

4 Gerulf Rieger and Ritch C. Savin-Williams, "Gender Nonconformity, Sexual Orientation, and Psychological Well-Being", *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 41, no. 3 (2012): 611-621.

5 Susan D. Cochran, J. Greer Sullivan, and Vickie M. Mays, "Prevalence of Mental Disorders, Psychological Distress, and Mental Health Services Use among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults in the United States", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 71, no. 1 (2003): 53.

6 Robert M. Kertzner, et al., "Social and Psychological Well-Being in Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals: The Effects of Race, Gender, Age, and Sexual Identity", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 79, no. 4 (2009): 500-510.

minority identities.[7] Societal attitudes may derive from several factors, some of which are entrenched in cultural and religious teachings. Individuals may have to manage the intersectional, complex expectations of both culture and religion on what it means to be LBTQ.

Globally, as compared to physical well-being, the psychological well-being of the individual has not been given much attention till recent times. In Singapore, the situation is similar, with focus and funding for mental health conditions and well-being only increasing in recent years. In 2014, the Health Promotion Board's Frequently Asked Questions on sexuality generated much controversy,[8] even though the intention of the article was to provide sexual health-related matters to young people of all sexualities. The article was lambasted for having a pro-homosexuality stance, and the article was eventually revised to remove informational resources such as LBTQ-friendly counselling resources.[9] This incident highlights the lack of structural and emotional support for the psychological well-being of LBTQ people.

While stigma associated with mental health issues can adversely affect an individual's well-being regardless of their SOGIESC, this will not be covered here. In this chapter, we explore the effects of the perception of someone's SOGIESC on psychological well-being, based on the experiences of our interviewees.

KEY FINDINGS

Our four main findings on psychological well-being were: (1) there was psychological distress associated with coming out and denial of identity, (2) influence on mental health, (3) influence on self-esteem, and (4) limited access to coping resources among LBTQ individuals.

1. Psychological distress associated with coming out and denial of identity

Coming out or disclosing one's LBTQ identity is stressful for various reasons, such as negative societal attitudes towards being LBTQ. This stress may be compounded by cultural and religious views towards LBTQ people. Coming out may be met with outright rejection, silence or denial, causing psychological distress. For example, when Jyoti first came out to her family, she was told to adhere to her family's Indian culture, to put the family first, and not shame the family. Her mother also told her that it was a phase, and she was asked to leave the home. However, she did not leave because she was still dependent on the family for her education, which she saw as her path to financial independence.

While Jyoti was rejected outright by her family, others may face silence and denial when they attempt to come out, which can be distressing as well. Yvonne was dismissed as crazy, and her mother did not talk about the issue, even though her mother was welcoming towards Yvonne's partners when they visited their home. Yvonne subsequently only came out when she was financially stable. Similarly, when Joyce came out to her parents, her mother blamed herself and cried for two weeks. Joyce's parents gradually accepted her, but she sensed that her mother was not happy with her girlfriends and stopped taking them home to stay overnight. For Dee, her mother said she was psychologically disturbed and needed to see a psychiatrist, and did not speak to her after she came out. Dee's mother also made physical threats to stop her from seeing her close female friends. These incidents resulted in Dee moving out of her mother's house in order to gain the autonomy to have relationships and friendships without fear. The negative reactions to coming out led Jyoti, Yvonne, Joyce, and Dee to make use of environmental mastery to change their environment or behaviour and therefore manage the psychological distress associated with coming out.

Apart from having to manage the stress of coming out, some of our interviewees suffered from social

7 Gary W. Harper, Nadine Jernewall, and Maria Cecilia Zea, "Giving Voice to Emerging Science and Theory for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People of Color", *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 10, no. 3 (2004): 187-199.

8 Ministry of Health, Singapore, "Response to HPB FAQs on Sexuality", February 17, 2014, https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/pressRoom/Parliamentary_QA/2014/hpb-sexuality.html.

9 Health Promotion Board, Singapore, "FAQs on Sexuality", http://www.hpb.gov.sg/HOPPortal/health-article/HPB056342.

isolation. Grace became withdrawn and emotionally distant from her family due to her sense of filial piety, as her family did not want her to "keep seeing" her girlfriend. As a result, Grace only came out to herself and others when she was older. Besides having to deal with the stigma of being LBTQ, Grace also went for counselling after an abusive relationship with an ex-partner.

Pamela struggled with self-blame and anger stemming from her internal conflict to maintain the "good image of gay people" and her own silence regarding negative comments about gay people at school. She withdrew, keeping to herself and saying that she did not open up about the bad things in her life, to prevent people from gossiping about her. Besides her own challenge with self-acceptance, Pamela also had to manage discriminatory behaviour from strangers as well as from her family. Being verbally harassed by strangers with homophobic remarks, such as when a group of guys shouted at Pamela and her partner that "you haven't seen a dick yet", increased Pamela's fear that she would not be able to protect herself and her partner. This fear resulted in Pamela being less affectionate with her partner in public and more conscious of place: she felt that going out 'required armour' and preferred to stay home with her partner, which led to a few break-ups. At home, Pamela was emotionally threatened by her brother, who said that he wanted to kill her. She would wake up in the middle of the night in fear of rape, violence, and being killed. But when she told her mother about the threat, her fears were dismissed with the repeated question, "What did you do?" Her mother blamed Pamela for her brother's issues. The psychological stress Pamela experienced on several fronts appeared to affect her self-acceptance and relationships with others.

In addition to sexual orientation, gender expression that is gender non-conforming also led to some degree of psychological distress for Andrea. Her family tried to control Andrea's clothing choices and appearance until Andrea moved into university accommodation. At the time of the interview, even though Andrea still got upset, she became used to brushing off the hurt her parents caused and did not let the remarks hurt her.

Yet the psychological distress of being LBTQ is not confined to coming out. As Jo and Sharif experienced, the perception of their SOGIESC resulted in the denial of their other experiences. Jo was abused by her mother since she was young for multiple reasons, including being gay. However, her primary school teachers did not take her complaints seriously, as "beating from parents was considered normal". When Sharif, a trans man, was molested for two years during primary school by a teacher who was his uncle's friend, his mother asked him not to imagine things. Aside from that, Sharif's family said to him that since he was not getting married, the money that they saved for his wedding would now pay for his sister's wedding. "That made me feel like my choices [to transition and get married] don't count," Sharif said, "and that I will be punished for my choice." Sharif's family also ignored his partner and children, while Sharif's mother-in-law psychologically punished his children for spending time with him, as she did not see Sharif's relationship with them as valid. Sharif's mother-in-law constantly blamed him for stress in the house despite his efforts to be a good step-parent. Sharif felt that he could not adequately parent his children without clear recognition as a legitimate parent whose parental decisions were respected and not questioned at every turn. Sharif's adequacy as a step-parent was thus called into question based on his gender identity.

In addition to being LBTQ, Rachel and Nurdiana also had to manage multiple minority identities. Rachel said she felt uncomfortable when people could not tell her gender, and when her mother commented on her body, reminding Rachel that she was different. In addition, Rachel pointed out that people seemed to ignore her sexuality due to her physical disability. "I think they maybe saw the chair before anything else. They don't think that people with disabilities have sexualities. So even if they think that I look kind of queer or gay, they will not follow that thought, because I'm on the wheelchair." Nurdiana's identity as a Muslim Malay daughter was denied by her parents. Not wanting her extended family to know that she was bisexual, her parents did not invite her to Hari Raya gatherings, telling the family that her absence was due to work. This was, in effect, erasure of her identity. Nurdiana's family had also threatened physical violence and disowning her, which she believed was possible, as these had previously happened to her. As Nurdiana said, her mother did not believe in bisexuality. "She thinks it is an utter disgrace and a

Connie was isolated from her own family when she first came out. They fought a lot, with her mother not speaking to her for a year and asking her father and her siblings not to talk to her as well. Connie also faced denial and silence from her family, with her elder brother trying to talk her out of it, as he thought she had sold herself to the devil, while Connie's younger brother said, "Don't talk to me, you're not part of the family." Connie was questioned by her mother for six months. Her mother said that liking women was shameful and wanted Connie to change. Connie's girlfriend was also socially isolated. She was not able to see her friends and was watched and questioned, being forced to see a counsellor in school for a month. The girlfriend was unable to cope and was in despair from the immense pressure from her family and school. Although these stressors were not directly experienced by Connie, it resulted in emotional and mental strain for the couple. Fortunately for Connie, her family situation improved later on.

complete alienation of whatever I had been brought up with to say that I was even interested in a woman." Coming out as LBTQ, and denial of their LBTQ identity, can be psychologically distressing, affecting the individual's self-acceptance (such as in Grace and Pamela's experiences) and relationships with others. This results in a desire for environmental mastery to reduce the psychological distress experienced, as seen in Jyoti and Yvonne's reactions to their circumstances.

2. Influence on mental health

The prejudice and discrimination LBTQ individuals experience may affect them to a greater extent than psychological distress, manifesting as mental health conditions and suicidal thoughts. This has potential implications for mental health.

The way Nurdiana's parents treated her, such as threats to disown her, was a key factor in her depression. Since she had added her name as a co-owner of the family home and was paying for it, she was unable to move out of the place where she stayed with her parents. Belinda believed that her relationship with her mother was strained due to her "behavioural" problems, as Belinda's mother had never targeted her siblings, only her. Belinda's mother expressed a lot of anger at her for being lesbian and seemed to be constantly trying to provoke a reaction. For instance, her mother threw things at her, physically threatened her with a knife, and would suddenly have an outburst of screaming and yelling at Belinda in the middle of the night, calling her names like "slut". Belinda's mother would also express displeasure when she brought her girlfriend home and rudely ask Belinda why they were there while in their presence. Belinda was offered medication because her parents thought it would help stop her from being gay, which Belinda felt was due to confusion, lack of understanding, and lack of support for SOGIESC issues. Belinda was sent to see a psychologist fortnightly for psychotherapy throughout her junior college years and was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder and borderline personality disorder. Aside from this, she also had difficulty coping with stress and was drinking too much. These multiple stressors of discriminatory behaviour, which adversely affected Belinda's mental health, led to her moving out during her second year of junior college to do her GCE A-levels in peace. In addition to her experience with her family, Belinda was also raped by her friend's brother and felt violated but did not know what to do next, resulting in an emotional meltdown. The discriminatory behaviour directed at Nurdiana and Belinda negatively affected their mental health.

For other LBTQ people, negative experiences may also cause them to have suicidal ideation, seeing death as a possible way out of their difficult circumstances. For example, trans woman Sheila experienced violence in the form of being badly beaten by her father, but her mother was not interested in helping her. She was also locked in a dark room for extended periods of time, leading to claustrophobia and feeling suicidal. Jyoti similarly endured both constant verbal abuse and restriction of movement, being locked outside the house if she came home late. She endured constant threats of being thrown out. Her father threatened to kill her for shaming the family, traumatising her until she finally moved out. Although her father claimed that he did not mean the things that he said when he was angry, Jyoti was unsure about this and felt that her father played mind games with her. The constant threats of throwing her out over a long period of time left Jyoti emotionally drained, with suicidal thoughts.

Coming out can be stressful, but being 'outed' may be much more stressful. Sahar's identity was unexpectedly revealed due to an online article she wrote about being lesbian. Her family and state education subsidy provider subsequently found out about Sahar's sexual orientation through this means. Her parents were angry about the perceived public shame, and the provider threatened to revoke her subsidy. These multiple issues, coupled with school assignments, made Sahar suicidal. She was reprimanded by the subsidy provider regarding the incident.

Another interviewee, Yvonne, faced a huge stressor in the form of her partner, who treated her badly, constantly putting her down and asking for money. This pressure from her partner, together with the stress from work, led to Yvonne feeling suicidal. Suicidal thoughts may cross people's minds when things are difficult for them, but for Alison, killing herself was a way out, even when she was seeking professional help. She was sobbing and depressed, and attempted suicide by jumping from the eighth floor of a shopping centre. She was stopped by a passerby

and was let off with a warning by the police. Alison also had run-ins with the law, where in one instance, a female investigation officer poked Alison in the head and called her "butch", based on her gender expression as a skinhead. Another investigation officer stood by laughing while the first officer taunted and teased her. When Alison was briefly in prison for drug trafficking, she experienced discriminatory behaviour such as her spectacles being removed despite her poor eyesight and being watched by the butch-presenting police officers when she showered. Alison used to cope by going to church and praying a lot when she was younger, but she turned to drugs and cutting to cope. She was also smoking and drinking.

Discriminatory behaviour such as verbal and physical abuse towards an individual for being LBTQ could possibly have a profound negative impact on the psychological well-being of the individual, as it affects mental health.

"For a while, I thought I was morally corrupt. I thought biologically, lesbians are not a real thing. There was a seed of doubt that was planted. You can't really say anything because when somebody tells you it's wrong, you can't really feel it's right if everybody says that it is wrong."

– Jo

3. Influence on self-esteem

An individual's self-esteem may be influenced by a range of factors, such as interactions and experiences with their surroundings. This includes both positive and negative experiences. When self-esteem is negatively affected, this may result in self-doubt and self-blame. Jo blamed herself after she was harassed and forcibly kissed by a friend whom she considered a "brother", as she thought she should not have been drinking with him alone. Joyce was terrified after an incident whereby she and her ex-wife were followed and called "lesbians" and "faggot" when they were holding hands. Joyce also felt that her partner's problems were her fault and felt worthless.

During Alison's adolescent years during the late 1990s, she had to manage both her confusion about her sexuality and the fact that the religious teachings she learnt were at odds with her sexuality. She did not know whom she could turn to. In Alison's words, "I didn't know what I was. I didn't know what was expected of me. So if I eventually get into a relationship with a girl, is it going to be like if I was with a guy? How do we navigate this mess, you know? I obviously can't get married to a girl. Then, oh no, how do I get an apartment in the future?" Alison passed as straight when she was young and struggled to understand why she was gay, since she was perceived as being able to get a boyfriend. On top of that, she was questioning why God had made her like that, which resulted in her drifting away from church.

In Nurdiana's past relationship, she was told to leave the house by her ex-partner twice because Nurdiana did not realise she had depression and was not willing to deal with it. Nurdiana then realised that she had been depressed partially because of her family's reaction against her sexuality, and became confrontational and aggressive to protect herself, to pre-empt being bullied or disappointed. The incidents of discrimination or denial of identity that Pamela and Nurdiana encountered made them question themselves, affecting their self-esteem and their psychological well-being.

4. Limited access to coping resources

Another type of psychological discrimination is systemic, such as the lack of adequate resources or limited access to coping resources for those who need it. When Dee's partner introduced her as her life

Yvonne was feeling suicidal and sought help from her psychiatrist, but her partner did not want Yvonne to come out to the psychiatrist. When using Medisave to pay for the visit, she was also worried she would be found out and fired from her civil service job for being gay, as well as for talking about her sexuality with the psychiatrist. Yvonne felt she was lucky that the psychiatrist did not openly judge her for her sexuality, as some of her other friends had met psychiatrists who were worse. Those friends never went back for another visit or sought other help for fear of being judged again. The perceived discrimination of being judged when seeking help is a very real fear, particularly in Yvonne's case where she was in a toxic relationship.

partner, she found that people did not want to think of two women as intimate partners. This perceived discrimination made Dee consider not bringing up the issue of her same-sex life partner when seeking help from healthcare professionals.

Belinda was raped but did not disclose this except to someone she was dating several years later. She did not feel comfortable enough to share this with her psychologist, who did not acknowledge Belinda as lesbian, declaring instead that she just had an unhealthy fixation on someone. The discriminatory behaviour of the psychologist and the perceived discrimination led to Belinda feeling hopeless and exhausted at not being able to access the support that she needed.

Dee wanted to take a personal protection order against her mother and her mother's partner due to their threats against her. When she initially attempted to seek help from the police, they said that until she "turned up with bruises or cuts, or dead, [she could not] get a personal protection order" even if she was being threatened or the people helping her were being threatened. Even when the locks at her home had been changed and she faced the possibility of being trapped in her own home, the police said they would send an escort but took no action until she told them she would file a civil suit against them if they did not. Although a voluntary welfare organisation offered her counselling, Dee withdrew from the service, as she "wanted to retain a tremendous degree of independence" and "was afraid of relying on people for help, because my experiences with authority were obviously not great". For Belinda and Dee, discrimination or bad experiences cut off their access to coping resources even when they attempted to address the psychological stressors they were facing.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Many of our interviewees faced psychological distress after coming out to their families, as they were shamed by family members or faced silence and denial of their identity. They struggled with feelings of anger and self-blame, had difficulty with self-acceptance, and coped by emotionally or physically withdrawing from their families and partners, which further weakened their relationships with others. Stressors were even greater when they had to manage multiple minority identities such as race and disability. The prejudice and discrimination LBTQ individuals experience, whether from coming out or being outed by others, may negatively affect their self-esteem and contribute to poor mental health and suicidal ideation to escape from their difficult situations.

Systemic barriers to psychological health prevented individuals from getting the help they needed even when they sought it. Interviewees said they perceived that healthcare professionals, including psychiatrists and psychologists, would discriminate against them because of their sexual orientation. Cases were also reported where authority figures such as the police actively refused to help, cutting off access to coping resources that would improve their well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement sensitivity and diversity training for service providers and state authorities, especially the police.
- Provide targeted counselling and social services for LBTQ persons and families.
- Institute anti-discrimination and inclusivity/diversity policies for healthcare and social service providers.
- Develop and launch sustained campaigns and public education efforts to increase awareness of LBTQ women's issues.

Chapter 7

HOUSING

INTRODUCTION

According to the Yogyakarta Principles, "everyone has the right to adequate housing, including protection from eviction, without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity" and the state must ensure, among other things, "equal rights to land and home ownership without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity" and "establish social programmes, including support programmes, to address factors relating to sexual orientation and gender identity that increase vulnerability to homelessness, especially for children and young people, including social exclusion, domestic and other forms of violence, discrimination, lack of financial independence, and rejection by families or cultural communities, as well as to promote schemes of neighbourhood support and security".[1]

However, as we have shown in the earlier chapter on violence and discrimination in the family (see Chapter 4, Home and Family) and as we will show in this chapter, LBTQ individuals are more vulnerable in terms of their access to safe and adequate housing. This is largely due to the high cost of housing in Singapore and the fact that the housing subsidies in place favour heterosexual family units and/or adult children who live with their older parents.

Housing in Singapore is provided by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and private developers. The HDB has been the primary provider of housing in Singapore since 1960. It is tasked with building affordable housing and close to 80% of the resident population lives in public housing flats built by the HDB. These flats cost a quarter as much as a private apartment or condominium built by a private developer in Singapore (approximately S$250,000 compared to S$1,000,000 for a private two-bedroom apartment). Given the lower cost of public housing compared to private housing and the measures put in place by the government to encourage home ownership, it is uncommon to find long-term renters in Singapore's housing market. Instead, renting is generally associated with low-income families. For many Singaporeans, the right to own their own home through the public housing scheme is seen as a fundamental right of every citizen. For many working Singaporeans, a key aim in life is to set aside sufficient savings to pay the downpayment for their flats. Citizen buyers can also make use of some of the funds from their Central Provident Fund (CPF) account for the purchase. CPF is the state-run compulsory savings scheme for Singaporeans and Singapore permanent residents that requires employees and employers to contribute a percentage of the employee's salary to the employee's CPF account.

However, there are strict criteria as to who can own a public housing flat and the types of grants they can obtain from the government to offset the cost of purchasing their flat. First-time citizen buyers who make up a heteronormative family unit (married husband and wife with children) receive the highest level of housing grant. Given the high cost of housing in Singapore, the range of subsidies buyers can obtain from the state is also dependent on annual household income. As such, lower-income buyers stand to gain higher subsidies compared to those who earn more. In addition, single unmarried persons are not allowed to buy public housing flats until they are 35 years old. The public housing scheme has thus been used effectively by the state to promote heteronormative families and to keep heteronormative family units together. Family units that include older parents living with adult children (extended family units) can buy larger flats with access to special subsidies. Married couples who want to live closer to their parents also have access to

1 *The Yogyakarta Principles*, http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles-en.

special housing grants that allow them to buy these flats. On the other hand, LBTQ individuals not in heterosexual marriages, single-parent families, and unwed mothers do not have access to public housing flats if they are under 35 years old. They are forced to enter the private housing or rental market, which costs significantly more, and for those who cannot afford this, they must live with members of their family until they can access more affordable public housing.

KEY FINDINGS

Four main findings emerged from our interviews with LBTQ individuals: (1) the high cost of housing incurred by LBTQ individuals, (2) independent home ownership is critical for LBTQ safety, (3) housing challenges for trans individuals are more pronounced, and (4) the right to housing as a form of investment for a secure future.

1. High cost of housing for LBTQ persons

LBTQ citizens in Singapore who are not in heterosexual marriages are unable to purchase public housing flats by themselves or with their same-sex partners until they reach 35 years of age. This includes same-sex couples and their children, who are not recognised as family units, unlike their heteronormative counterparts. They are also unable to access housing grants available to heterosexual married couples and their families. LBTQ citizens are able to purchase public housing flats as joint single owners but only after they turn 35. The inability to access affordable housing once LBTQ individuals attain adulthood and legal independence means that many must live with their families or move out to rent in the private market. This is seen by many as highly unstable and financially unfeasible.

LBTQ individuals like Jamie who want to move out of their parent's home before 35 years of age must rent. Jamie said that she had spent close to S$9,000 a year on rent. She had been living on her own for seven years at the time of the interview. She said this is "the price of sanity, right… I wouldn't have been able to buy a flat until I was 35, which meant waiting all those years. And even if I've reached 35, I'm still not sure I'll be able to afford a flat..." The high cost of rental means that these individuals have less savings to purchase their HDB flat or private apartment.

Anita said that she was unable to purchase housing with her partner on the same terms as a heterosexual couple. She and her partner could only purchase a flat as joint singles and not as a family unit. She said that while LBTQ people can purchase flats as singles, this is essentially a "tax on being LBTQ" on three fronts, "(A) delaying the purchase, (B) not being able to buy directly from the government, as opposed to on the open market, and (C) not having access to the subsidies or the cash grants, right? And I think if you add it up, for an equivalent house, it's about S$200,000 to S$250,000."

LBTQ individuals, like other single citizens, can only buy a small one-bedroom flat directly from the government and be eligible for a housing grant if their monthly income is below S$6,000. If their income is higher than that by the time they reach 35 years of age, they are expected to purchase their public housing flat from the open market or a private apartment, which has a higher cost. When purchasing private apartments, the compulsory savings scheme (CPF) cannot be tapped on for 5% of the downpayment for the flat, meaning that cash must be used. In effect, if an LBTQ individual wanted to buy a private apartment, they would need to pay 20% of the cost of the apartment as downpayment. The first 5% must come from their own savings, while the remaining 15% can come from their CPF. A small one-bedroom studio apartment in the private market can cost around S$600,000 to S$900,000 depending on the location. This means a cash downpayment of S$120,000 to S$180,000, and S$30,000 to S$45,000 must come from cash savings outside of the CPF.

Individuals like Jamie would have spent more of their savings on renting in the interim period, and thus it would take longer for them to save up the amount of S$30,000 to S$45,000. By the time they reach 35 years of age, their monthly income might also disqualify them from purchasing new HDB flats with any grants or subsidies from the government. In order to qualify for the right to move out of their parents' homes and live independently, LBTQ individuals require a stable income and sufficient savings amassed early in their adult life. Without this, it will not be possible to purchase housing, and they will be forced

to rent or continue living with their parents. The latter option may not be feasible in instances where LBTQ individuals experience domestic violence and discrimination at home as a result of gender and sexuality non-conformity. As a result, LBTQ persons may be driven to homelessness in order to escape violence and discrimination at home.

2. Independent home ownership critical for LBTQ safety

Access to independent home ownership is critical for the safety of LBTQ individuals. Without this, many of them live in fear of their parents discovering their sexuality and being asked to leave the family home, are unable to escape family members who are perpetrators of violence and discrimination, and are unable to access secure rental housing due to homophobic landlords.

For example, Nic was forced to leave her family home because her mother viewed her sexuality as a source of embarrassment. She did not want Nic to be in contact with her girlfriend, so Nic was forced to leave the family home, which was then based in Hong Kong. In Singapore, Nic eventually moved out to get away from her mother's attempts to control her. However, she was forced to sell her possessions online to raise sufficient income to afford rent. Similarly, Cris was thrown out of her parents' house for two weeks when she refused to 'change'. She could not afford to move out permanently and continued to live with her family because she found that the rent and cost of living in Singapore were too high for her to afford to move out on her monthly income. Living with her family, she was forced to pretend that the issue of her sexuality did not exist.

The situation for trans individuals is also atrocious, given that they are just as likely to experience family violence (see Chapter 4, Home and Family). Their need to move out of the family home can mean the difference between life and death. Hari, a trans man, tried to apply for housing at 19 and was told by the HDB that he could only apply with his parents and did not qualify to apply as a single person. Emily, a trans woman, said that having access to housing is important, as it provided her with the privacy to realise a trans identity. Living alone is not easy, but living with one's parents can also be very challenging.

For those LBTQ individuals who can afford to rent a room or apartment, housing may not always be secure. This is due primarily to the fact that landlords are often homophobic and unwilling to rent to LBTQ individuals. Fadilah said that it is hard to find a place to rent because online portals sometimes indicate that landlords will not rent to lesbians or gays. Once they found a landlord willing to rent the space to them, they also tried to keep costs low by avoiding agent fees and renting without proper contracts. In this way, landlords had the upper hand, and she and her girlfriend found themselves moving from place to place when the landlord decided to evict them. Pamela said that when she was looking for a place to rent with her partner and told potential landlords that they were partners, the landlords became more reluctant to rent out the space. She had experienced this twice.

3. Housing challenges for trans individuals are pronounced

Lack of housing security is particularly problematic for transgender individuals. Sheila, a trans woman, was not able to access public housing because she could not afford to buy a public housing apartment on her own and was unable to find a 'normal' person to share in renting or buying a home. She went to see the Member of Parliament for her area, but he advised her to go to a shelter. Sheila could not turn to her family members for help, as they had rejected her. Trans individuals have to ensure they have a secure source of income to buy their own place or rent. For many, job security and lack of family support can be a problem (see Chapter 4, Home and Family, and Chapter 9, Employment). Transgender individuals often have to wait longer to purchase their own flat. Even when they have the support of a partner, lack of legal recognition of their trans identity before sex reassignment surgery means that they cannot access subsidies and grants for public housing as a family unit.

However, trans persons who have gone through sex reassignment surgery can change their identity markers in their identification cards and official documents and hence gain access to subsidies and grants for public housing as a family unit. For example, Sharif, who identifies as transmasculine, said that he could not use his income to get a HDB loan to buy

Hari, a trans man, was thrown out of his ex-girlfriend's house after her death. He was homeless for two years and sometimes lived with friends without their parents' knowledge. When one friend's family found out that he was hiding there, he was chased out of their home. He was forced to sleep in East Coast Park and other public spaces.

a flat for the family. Instead, they relied on the grants his partner could get as a single mother and pooled this with his own income to rent a small apartment for S$1,800 a month. They would have to wait until they turned 35 to purchase a flat as joint singles, being unable to form a family nucleus as required by the law. The housing situation for pre-operative transgender individuals is, therefore, challenging. Those who cannot afford the surgery when they are just coming out are unable to self-actualise. While they may identify as a member of the opposite sex, they cannot legally change their identity until they have undergone the surgery, and they are thus unable to purchase a public housing apartment and begin family life with their life partner. It should be noted, however, that once transgender individuals have undergone sex reassignment surgery, they have access to heterosexual privilege in Singapore.

4. Housing as symbol of independence and source of investment and security

For many Singaporeans, home ownership is a symbol of citizenship, independence, and security. The Singapore government argues that the flat citizens own is their single largest asset and that high levels of home ownership symbolise wealth and the growth and development of the Singapore economy. For example, Kong and Yeoh make this point quoting then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who said, "The best stake we can give to Singaporeans is a house or a flat, a home. It is the single biggest asset for most people, and its value reflects the fundamentals of the economy."[2]

Home ownership is also a crucial source of retirement income. Older Singaporeans can sell their flats back to the state and receive a monthly payment. They may also sell a larger flat, buy a smaller one, and keep any profits for their retirement savings. Others may also rent out rooms in their homes as a source of income. However, many LBTQ individuals in same-sex partnerships are unable to purchase their flat independently until they are much older, unlike their counterparts in heterosexual marriages. The sooner Singaporeans pay off the cost of their flats, the sooner they may reap the rewards from renting or selling their flats. LBTQ people often start this process later, as they must wait until they are 35 years of age.

According to Andrea, "Because you're at this age where housing is the one thing on your mind, you want to move out, you don't want to rely on your parents forever. And this government is one of your biggest stumbling blocks. They make it so easy for straight people to set up their family. Their whole premise behind this thing is, 'this is the kind of people I want, and I'll do whatever I can to make it easier for these people', and the rest just get left out."

The lack of housing security is a source of stress for many LBTQ persons who have to wait until they are 35 to purchase subsidised housing from the HDB. There is no guarantee that their landlord will rent to them indefinitely. According to Fadilah, who was 24 at the time of the interview, "I will have to suffer these 11 years. So might as well get used to it. Unless the government does something about the [housing] law... Nobody's going to rent you for 11 years. Contract also maximum 1 to 2 years. Then you'll still have to find somewhere new."

"For a very long time, in my room, a lot of my furniture like my stands and stuff are actually my boxes with cloth over. I'm kinda prepared to go if I have to. 'Cause every year the lease, they tell us it's going to end."

– Sarah, on how she coped with the lack of housing security

2 Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of 'Nation'* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

LBTQ individuals believe that the lack of housing security means that other aspects of their lives are also affected. For example, Fadilah also said, "If you don't have a roof, you can't go to work. Because if you want to go to work, where are you going to go back and rest? And it will be difficult for you to go through your everyday life. I've tried sleeping at the beach for one night, and I'm like, oh shit, this is too shitty I can't do this." Similarly, Sheila said, "What I am looking for, before I die, at least let me get this BTO (Built to Order flat), one room, one hall flat, let me get this flat. At least if I die, government can take it back. At least let me experience having my own flat. Rather than staying in people's house and then scared to do this and scared to do that. I'm 44, if I'm going to be scared of doing so many things, what's the purpose of me living? From childhood, I've been scared of everything I touch. I'm still going through this here! Well then, if I got my own house, I can cook at any time. I can wake up and eat at any time. I can't do that when I live with my family, they will say I am noisy."

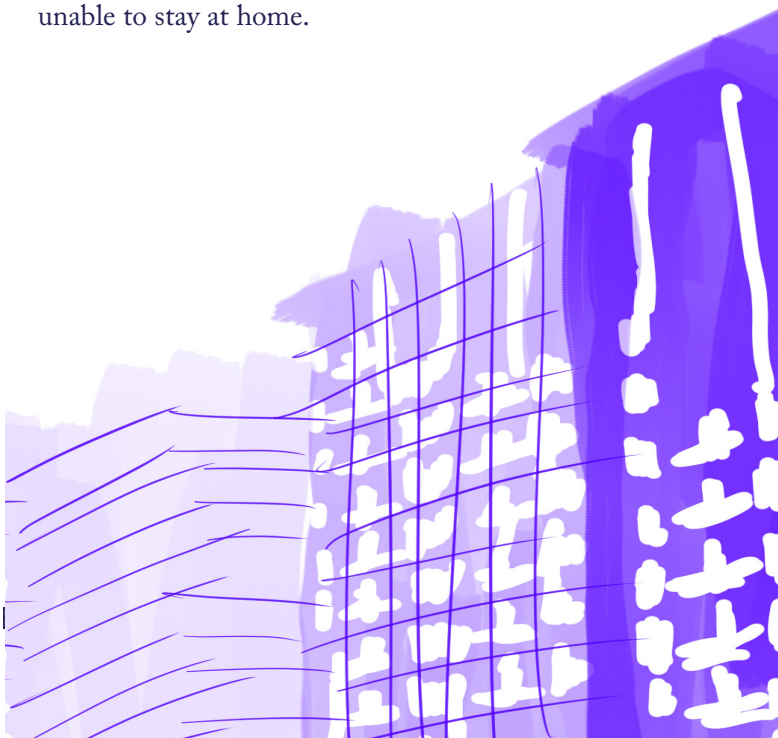
For someone like Nurdiana, home ownership is more important than a secure life with her partner. Some are willing to put up with the lack of recognition or choose not to live with a partner so that they can easily rent or buy a place. As Nurdiana said, "I think as a queer person in Singapore, having your own housing is probably the most important thing you ever need to do. Do not think about your partner, think about your house. Think about your house. Once you turn 35, go for it, go for it." Heterosexual couples do not have to make such choices. They enjoy secure housing, recognition of their partnerships, and the possibility of living with their partners as a family unit with the security of the home they own together.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

LBTQ individuals not in heterosexual marriages are unable to access subsidised public housing until they are 35 years old. Even if they are in long-term relationships and have formed a stable household with a long-term live-in partner, their LBTQ family unit will not be recognised, and they do not get access to public housing until they reach the age of 35 and can apply as joint singles. As a result, LBTQ individuals are only able to rent and cannot purchase their own public housing until later in life, unlike heterosexual couples. They spend a significant portion of their monthly income on rental, resulting in lower monthly savings that could have been set aside to pay the deposit for the downpayment on a flat and other important necessities, like healthcare, as they age. Even as renters, LBTQ persons are forced to move from place to place as they are unable to cope with the high rental cost, unsecure contracts, and homophobic landlords who may decide not to renew their contract or evict them. Without access to stable and affordable housing, LBTQ individuals are forced to live with their family (parents, siblings, etc). For some, this means being forced to remain in the closet, or to come out and risk living with abuse, discrimination, and violence at the hands of family members because they are unable to move out.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make housing policies more inclusive so that LBTQ individuals and singles can purchase public housing at an earlier age.
- Recognise same-sex partnerships in housing policies and guidelines so that all couples in committed relationships have the same home ownership rights, with an equal amount of financial subsidy for flat purchases and joint ownership without age limitations.
- Support and fund shelters for LBTQ youth who are homeless and train existing shelters to provide safe, affirming spaces for LBTQ youth who are unable to stay at home.



Chapter 8

EDUCATION & SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations CRC, which Singapore has ratified, defines child as "a human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".[1] Singapore's definition places 'child' as anyone below the age of 14 years.[2] Based on both the CRC and local laws, Singapore is obliged to provide for the "welfare, care, protection and rehabilitation of children and young persons". This group includes children who identify as LBTQ, who may or may not be gender conforming.

As children are in school during their formative years, schools and the adults who oversee these schools play a critical role in their lives and have a duty to protect and support their development. Even though all children are entitled to the right to education, which is critical for learning and development, the rights of LBTQ children are often violated in this area. As stated in the Yogyakarta Principles, it is important that states "take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure equal access to education, and equal treatment of students, staff and teachers within the education system, without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity".[3]

Similarly, Articles 2 and 19 of the CRC state the need to protect the child from all forms of discrimination as well as physical and mental violence.[4]

Violence in the school environment can be supported by institutional structures, such as gender inequality, gendered social norms, and the absence of policies that prohibit violence and discrimination. Gender inequality may manifest as gender-based harassment in boys who tease another boy for displaying feminine traits or gestures. Studies have shown that sexual minorities have reported high rates of school-based victimisation and violence, with 43% to 53% of lesbian and bisexual female pupils experiencing homophobic bullying in British schools.[5] A regional review showed that verbal, physical and social bullying was common in the Asia-Pacific, with transgender youth facing the greatest challenges, especially gender non-conforming females and trans men.[6]

A particularly prevalent form of emotional and psychological violence is homophobic and transphobic bullying, as has been found internationally and in this report. Bullying is generally defined as a situation where an individual is the target of aggressive behaviour by another student or students, when a power imbalance

1 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx.

2 Children and Young Persons Act, Singapore, Cap 38 (2001 Rev Ed), https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CYPA1993.

3 *The Yogyakarta Principles*, http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles-en.

4 *Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

5 April Guasp, Stonewall and University of Cambridge, *The School Report: The Experiences of Gay Young People in Britain's Schools in 2012*, https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/The_School_Report__2012_.pdf.

6 Being LGBT in Asia, *Asia-Pacific Consultation on School Bullying Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression: Meeting Report*, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002338/233825e.pdf.

exists between the individuals involved, and when the bullying behaviour happens more than once."[7] Such bullying can be based on both actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity,[8] and can greatly affect the education and health of LBTQ children. International studies have shown that the ability of children to learn effectively and remain in school is impacted by violence in schools; the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the percentage of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students who did not go to school for at least one day because of safety concerns ranged from 11% to 30% of gay and lesbian students and 12% to 25% of bisexual students.[9] Numerous studies show that LGBTQ children are more likely to experience depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.[10]

Institutions that implemented measures to reduce the occurrence of discrimination and violence have seen positive results for LBTQ children. Schools in the United States that attempted to curb homophobic bullying have seen such bullying incidents drop by half, and pupils are twice as likely to feel happy in school.[11] At the same time, generic anti-bullying policies are insufficient to ensure the safety of LGBTQ pupils: a United States study that compared LGBTQ and heterosexual-identified students with similar levels of peer victimisation showed that the LGBTQ students were about three times more likely to think about suicide or to attempt suicide and 1.4 times as likely to skip school.[12] Anti-bullying policies that specifically address sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are needed, along with education to promote discussion and understanding among students.

In Singapore, compulsory primary education[13] is heavily subsidised for Singaporeans and Permanent Residents.[14] This has resulted in an enrolment rate of 100% in primary schools and 99.5% in secondary schools in 2014,[15] according to the MOE. There is a strong drive for students to do well academically,[16] and paper qualifications often determine one's salary in the workforce, hence influencing the individual's socioeconomic status. Due to the high-pressure environment and the importance of education, any bullying, victimisation from peers, and negligence or mistreatment from school authorities has a comparatively large influence on students' development.

Bullying in general is also prevalent in Singapore primary and secondary schools, with a reported incidence of more than 20%, according to local surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007.[17] Verbal bullying was the most common form of bullying. Girls experienced

7 Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, *Bullying in U.S. Schools: 2014 Status Report*, http://olweus.sites.clemson.edu/documents/Bullying%20in%20US%20Schools--2014%20Status%20Report.pdf.

8 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Education Sector Responses to Homophobic Bullying*, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002164/216493e.pdf.

9 US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *LGBT Youth*, http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm.

10 Joseph P. Robinson and Dorothy L. Espelage, "Bullying Explains Only Part of LGBTQ–Heterosexual Risk Disparities", *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 8 (2012): 309-319, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235990985_Bullying_Explains_Only_Part_of_LGBTQ-Heterosexual_Risk_Disparities_Implications_for_Policy_and_Practice.

11 Guasp, *The School Report.*

12 Robinson and Espelage, "Bullying".

13 Ministry of Education, Singapore, "Compulsory Education", https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-system/compulsory-education.

14 Ministry of Education, Singapore, "Monthly School and Miscellaneous Fees", *General Information on Studying in Singapore*, https://www.moe.gov.sg/admissions/international-students/general-info#monthly-school-fees.

15 Data.gov.sg, Singapore, *Net Enrolment Ratio for Primary and Secondary Education*, https://data.gov.sg/dataset/net-enrolment-ratio-for-primary-and-secondary-education?view_id=ab69441f-951a-4d99-9b31-735fa8530121&resource_id=7b184af5-b718-4c93-b217-c3bb3ab304f4.

16 Shivali Nayak, "Singapore Schools: 'The Best Education System in the World' Putting Significant Stress on Young Children", *ABC News*, January 6, 2016, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-06/best-education-system-putting-stress-on-singaporean-children/6831964.

17 Singapore Children's Society, *Young Adults' Recall of School Bullying*, https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/resources/front/template/scs/files/monograph9.pdf.

more relational bullying, such as rumour spreading, compared to boys (girls: 44%, boys: 17%). Researchers found that girls in secondary schools were more likely than boys to report negative emotional and psychological complaints such as difficulty sleeping and self-harm behaviour, although this was not true of primary school students. The research also showed that only one-third of the bullied children sought help, and that help-seeking behaviour was more effective in decreasing victimisation when the children sought help from the school and their family.[18] This is of concern, as most of our victim-survivors were discriminated against by schools and families or expressed that these parties were unable to help them, which suggests that normally effective avenues have questionable efficacy when it comes to LBTQ children.

In educational institutions, discrimination and violence may take the form of failure to recognise diverse sexualities, as well as lack of protection for the safety and privacy of children. There has been much controversy over sexuality education in Singapore in terms of LGBTQ issues. The MOE determines the curricula for public schools that most schools and educators are expected to follow, including a sexuality education programme that is mainly taught by "specially-selected and trained teachers in schools".[19] Its approach to sexuality education emphasises abstinence first and discourages non-conforming SOGIESC from being normalised.[20,21] Educators are required to follow the MOE's official stance when referring to LGBTQ issues with their students; those who do otherwise are chastised and threatened with removal from their positions. Notably, the official position, as signalled by the government in law and policy, contradicts the neutral stance towards LGBTQ persons taken in a Frequently Asked Questions page by the Health Promotion Board, the statutory board that drives national health promotion.[22] In addition, children's privacy and right to access information are often mediated by the family and institutions, which places further burdens on the LBTQ child through the crucial developmental years.

KEY FINDINGS

There were four key findings in relation to education and schools: (1) bullying by peers as punishment for non-conformity to gender roles was common, (2) schools engaged in victim-blaming and failed to protect students from bullies, (3) students and educators in state schools were subject to gender policing, and (4) there was a lack of guidance for educators and silencing of LGBTQ-affirmative views.

1. Peer bullying is common as punishment for non-conformity to gender roles

Bullying in school was a common form of violence and discrimination among our interviewees, with at least 14 interviewees claiming that they had experienced some form of bullying from their peers. Such bullying took the form of physical or verbal abuse and sexual harassment. Gender non-conforming women, especially those who were in same-sex relationships, were most often the target of peer bullying, and these could be attempts to discipline any gender non-conforming behaviour or appearance.

In many cases, bullying was a reaction to a student's same-sex relationship and had the effect of changing the course of the survivor's school life. Elaine, a 21-year-old Chinese lesbian, was harassed by boys when she was in school. A male classmate sexually violated her girlfriend, touching her breasts

18 Ibid.

19 Ministry of Education, Singapore, "Information for External Providers", *Sexuality Education*, https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-and-emotional-learning/sexuality-education/information-for-external-providers.

20 Ministry of Education, Singapore, "Scope and Teaching Approach of Sexuality Education in Schools", *Sexuality Education*, https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-and-emotional-learning/sexuality-education/scope-and-teaching-approach-of-sexuality-education-in-schools.

21 Ministry of Education, Singapore, "MOE Framework for Sexuality Education", *Sexuality Education*, https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-and-emotional-learning/sexuality-education/moe-framework-for-sexuality-education.

22 Health Promotion Board, "FAQs on Sexuality", http://www.hpb.gov.sg/HOPPortal/health-article/HPB056342.

and dry-humping her, suggesting a threesome with him. He then threatened to out Elaine to teachers and get her into trouble. Her response was to talk to him and get an apology, choosing not to report the incident so that the boy would not be punished too harshly.

Gina, a pansexual/bisexual woman, was filmed by her junior college schoolmates when she was having sex with her girlfriend in a school bathroom at 17 years of age. They heard a commotion outside and later learnt that more than five students had entered the bathroom where they were. After the filming, someone told them from outside the toilet cubicle that a video had been taken. The video was put online and went viral. The school could not identify the perpetrators, as students protected their friends and did not reveal names. As Gina said, "Some people knew who it was, but they couldn't say, they didn't want to tell us, because they were also their friends you see, so it was like… it was serious for us, but at the same time, they were also protecting the people who did it."

Gender non-conformity was the other major factor that triggered bullying in schools. Fadilah, a 24-year-old Malay-Muslim butch lesbian who had short hair in junior college, was continually harassed by her peers, receiving repeated calls of "lesbian" from Malay boys everywhere she went. "When you are in class, they will laugh and look at you," she said. Fadilah gave up, lost interest in her studies, and dropped out of school after her first year, although her grades were fine.

Yvonne, a 37-year-old Chinese woman with an androgynous appearance, was hit by a Malay boy in secondary school who thought she was an effeminate boy. She was told by her classmates that she was ugly. Yvonne said that she was socially ostracised for her gender non-conforming appearance even though it was out of her control: "When I was young, I didn't mean to look androgynous, I just looked androgynous. It wasn't an image I was trying to cultivate. I don't look like a boy, I don't look like a girl. I was in a typical neighbourhood ghetto co-ed school. You don't fit in, you're not pretty, you're not boy-crazy, you don't fit in. You don't look like a boy, don't look like a girl, worse. So they'll just tell me, you don't look like a boy don't look like a girl, get lost out of my face. I never had a clique. I never had a bunch of friends I trust."

Similarly, transgender individuals were perceived as departing from expected gender norms and were often called names and harassed by their schoolmates. Grave bullying and sexual violence occurred in a children's home with Sheila, a 44-year-old Indian trans woman. As she was effeminate and of small stature, older children and staff called her names and tormented her throughout the six years she stayed in the home. To forestall further hurt, she began attacking the other children before they could hit her. She was sent to a boys' home at the age of 14, where boys tried to sexually abuse her, asking her for blowjobs. In such cases where bullied individuals respond by becoming perpetrators, peer bullying can perpetrate a harmful cycle of violence.

Confirming that school bullying by peers often results from lack of acceptance of gender non-conformity, Nurdiana and Alison both noted that they were teased less and received better treatment in school when they presented as more feminine.

2. Schools blamed the victim and failed to protect students

We found that teachers, schools and other institutions supported the victimisation of LBTQ students through their inaction in response to peer bullying. In many instances, schools failed to take a hard stance against the discrimination and violence that LBTQ children suffered, showing the failure of school policies to protect all students or of schools in implementing these policies.

After they were filmed by their schoolmates, Gina and her girlfriend were questioned by the school. The couple were blamed for their schoolmates' blatant invasion of privacy, with the school asking how many times they had had sex and saying that people had reported their "touchy-feely" behaviour even before the incident. Instead of sending a strong message opposing the students' invasion of privacy, the school asked the couple to withdraw from school and tried to close the case quickly; only one student was punished with one day's suspension. Gina was told to write a statement about the incident that would show she had voluntarily withdrawn from school: "They didn't tell us specifically what you should write, what you should

include, but it was like a confession, basically. They wanted us to say that 'Yes, it was us who did it, and we deserve this and we need to, and that's why I'm going to withdraw' or something." Gina and her girlfriend were not asked for their side of the story, and Gina only spoke to the school's discipline master. No one in the school acknowledged the incident or supported them, and Gina said there was a sense that it was the couple's fault.

Another interviewee, Jamie, who was a teacher in the same junior college, said that three students were punished with only one day of detention for the incident. Jamie felt that the school sent the message that "the two girls were really committing the bigger crime… compared to those who were trespassing in the toilet and taking photos and videos". Jamie also disclosed that the school did not tell the staff what had happened, and therefore few people could have intervened to protect the couple at the time. The principal also framed the incident to put the blame on the couple. According to Jamie, "Most of the staff did not know till about one or two months later. And only because it came out in the papers. And even then, when the principal told the school about it – she recounted the whole case and she did so for almost half an hour – nowhere in the case did she say that there were people in the toilet taking photos and videos. It became a 'lesbians caught having sex in the toilet' case. So I think that's just lack of transparency."

This pattern of victim blaming amounted to discrimination against individuals who had non-conforming sexualities. It also occurred in trans woman Sheila's case. Sheila was sexually harassed by other children at the boys' home she was at, but the staff at the home did not take action and engaged in victim blaming, saying that it was her fault: "They said I made a mistake when I was first caught kissing my boyfriend. That's the mistake I made." When asked whether the staff at the home knew about the bullying, Sheila said she had told them just before she was released, as she might have been beaten up by the bullies if she had told them earlier.

Jamie also noted that after Gina's filming incident, the junior college arranged for a speaker from a megachurch to address students and that the incident was "framed in a very deviant way". She felt that it was the teacher's job to get students to consider different perspectives, and they should receive better support. She described the current climate for teachers as one where "if you overstep these boundaries or do something that upsets society at large, we'll rap you on the head".

With the lack of support from educational institutions, it is unsurprising that the LBTQ respondents surveyed often did not seek support from teachers, counsellors, or other authority figures in times of need. For both Fadilah and Elaine, teachers did not provide any assistance, therefore implicitly perpetuating the situation. Fadilah asked for help from a lecturer, but no action was taken to help her, and she decided to withdraw from the school.

3. Students and educators in state schools subject to gender policing

Both students and educators were subject to active disciplinary measures by schools against unconventional gender expressions. This included forcibly separating same-sex couples and policing of the appearance of students and educators themselves. Many of our interviewees related incidents in which teachers told them to behave in a way that fit the stereotype of their assigned gender or punished them for not doing so.

Disproportionately harsh measures that would not have been used for opposite-gender couples were often used by parents and schools to separate same-gender couples. Connie, a 30-year-old Chinese lesbian, suffered immense pressure from her girlfriend's family and school over their relationship when they were in school, from 2003 to 2004. This caused emotional and mental strain for both of them, as it came from people they respected. Her girlfriend was watched and questioned, and was in despair as she was not allowed to see her friends. The school sent Connie for a month's counselling and treated her like she needed help although she previously had good relationships with her teachers and parents. In the case of Ash, a masculine-presenting queer woman who was also bullied in school, she and her girlfriend were pulled out of class for hours and questioned by the vice-principal, head of year, and discipline mistress. In contrast, an opposite-sex relationship is, at worst, handed over to the parents for action instead of requiring intensive intervention from school staff.

"Actually, my catalyst towards my self-acceptance was from my uncle. And it was very weird. All he said was one sentence. I asked him what he thought of homosexuals, and he said it was a non-issue and it's entirely normal. That was the catalyst to my self-acceptance. And that is just so… mind-blowing. Perhaps if one of the teachers had just pulled me aside and said that, I would have felt very differently about myself."

– Ash, a cisgender Chinese queer woman in her 20s

Educators who found out that their students were LBTQ outed them in class without their consent and actively reinforced negative stereotypes associated with homosexuality in an attempt to shame non-conforming behaviours. When she was in primary school, Jo tried to tell a teacher that she liked girls and that she had a crush on a girl in her class. The teacher told her they would talk about it later, but during class, the teacher told Jo to go up to the front of the class and asked her "So you like girls?" When Jo said yes, the teacher said, "Actually it's wrong. Has any male in your family done anything to you or sexually abused you?" She also talked to Jo for 20 minutes about sexual assault even after Jo said that she was fine with the male gender and had never been assaulted. As a result, Jo thought she was "morally corrupt": "I thought biologically, lesbians are not a real thing. There was a seed of doubt that was planted. You can't really say anything because when somebody tells you it's wrong, you can't really feel it's right if everybody says that it is wrong." On another occasion when she was 14, Ash was kept separate from her girlfriend by a teacher during a physical education class. The two of them were in the same group of six. The teacher "screamed across the court that 'You two are not supposed to meet each other!'". Such behaviour would have outed the couple to the class and was a disproportionate reaction to their relationship.

The action taken by these schools failed to respect children's rights to privacy and expression. Many of our interviewees found that their privacy was arbitrarily interfered with, which contravenes Article 16 of the CRC. Connie was in junior college when her girlfriend's teacher spotted them holding hands in town, and the girlfriend's bag was checked when the classroom was empty. Finding some photos, the school raided the girlfriend's locker and confiscated her phone, then asked her parents to look through her desk, finding their love letters. The family also monitored her girlfriend closely and ferried her to and from school, putting great pressure on both students. Likewise, the school authorities confiscated Ash and her girlfriend's phones and read all their messages, reading it back to them and asking them what was meant by, for instance, "Maybe we're doing it wrong. Maybe we should be doing it horizontally". All their teachers received emails from the school informing them about Ash's relationship, effectively outing the couple. Ash and her girlfriend were also made examples of by their teachers to warn other students against being gay, and they endured stalking from schoolmates. Ash experienced anger, disappointment, fear, and suicidal thoughts during the school's intervention and blamed herself for the bullying in school, stating that it was "their fault" for kissing in public. Another interviewee, Elaine, reported that teachers pried into her personal life, saying that "as your teacher I have the right to know".

Educators were not spared from gender policing. Grace, a physical education and music teacher, was asked by her principal whether she wore dresses and if she had always had her hair short. The principal asked Grace to try wearing a dress and suggested that she wore formal clothes during the assembly period instead of the prescribed uniform for physical education classes (usually T-shirt and shorts). She added, "I don't care what you do outside of school, but I do not want the students to talk about you." When the principal demanded that all the physical education teachers change out of their T-shirts and shorts when not teaching physical education classes, Grace found herself wanting to run away from the principal like she was a student again.

Dee, a Singaporean cisgender lesbian, and her wife were relocating back to Singapore and went to audit an arts school for their daughter. They asked the assistant principal of one school what measures would be taken to protect their daughter against discrimination or bullying that she might experience for being the child of same-sex parents. "And there was complete silence. This person did not even know how to deal with our question. It wasn't a matter of them having a policy or not having a policy. They just really did not know. I mean the person just really did not know how to process our question." The assistant principal eventually said they had to check with the ministry, then never got back to Dee about the matter. It was revealing that another school, which was not associated with the MOE, said it would not tolerate bullying of any kind. Dee sent her daughter to the latter school.

4. Lack of guidance for educators and silencing of LGBTQ-affirmative views

Our LBTQ respondents who had sought help from teachers said that lack of teacher training on LBTQ issues and abuse in relationships prevented them from providing assistance. When she was 15, Sahar sought help from three teachers for her girlfriend who was threatening to kill herself and had physically abused Sahar. Her teachers were supportive but never acknowledged the relationship or addressed the abuse. Her school counsellor saw Sahar as the aggressor in the relationship, as she was the more masculine-presenting of the two, and asked her to "back off". Her girlfriend was seen as the victim even though Sahar had been abused.

Ash pointed to the inadequate sexuality education in her school as the reason for her lack of knowledge about same-sex intimacy. She "used to think that it was just like an injection". In consequence, she did not know what was happening when she first had sex with a girl (at 13 years of age) and was penetrated without her consent. Her sexual partner continued to try different sexual acts without obtaining her consent, such as BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism), and continued even when Ash said no. Ash's second intimate partner was emotionally abusive, messaging her constantly with very negative thoughts and showing her unhappiness when Ash went out with other people. When Ash told a teacher about her abusive relationship, the teacher was visibly uncomfortable and told Ash "to go see the school counsellor instead of her"; Ash did not do so, given her bad experiences with authority figures.

Some of the educators in the public school system whom we interviewed said that they felt it was difficult to express LGBTQ-affirmative opinions. LBTQ respondents found it difficult to be out due to an unspoken ministry policy against homosexuality. Grace would hear homophobic comments from the children she taught and felt "limited" as an educator when she was unable to teach them the "need to respect people who are different from you". Grace and two stakeholders (a junior college teacher and a former MOE employee who spoke off the record) expressed that they knew of no explicit MOE guidelines for or against homosexuality. Instead, the principal was seen as the authority, set the tone on conversations, and indicated that pro-LGBTQ views were not encouraged. The junior college teacher was told "to deflect as far as possible" the topic of homosexuality if it came up and, if pressed for an answer, to say that they "do not encourage LGBTQ lifestyles or behaviour".

An incident with Jamie provided evidence of the MOE's stance. Jamie once wrote a letter to the press saying that students should be taught to think critically about sexuality-related topics. The MOE subsequently discouraged a school from hiring Jamie as a teacher because it was concerned about how she "would teach certain controversial topics" due to her letter to the press. Jamie said, "I was not actively saying that I was queer, or even advocating for homosexuality, I was just saying that in this subject, we should be allowed to speak freely, and encourage debate and teach students how to discuss and debate intelligently. That's the whole point of critical thinking, and not so much to adhere to social norms." Jamie also reported that a video about same-sex parents was removed from a school for review after a parent complained that teachers had used it for their classes. The incident caused teachers at the school to become uncertain about what was permitted.

Other LBTQ educators who were among our respondents shared that they were advised not to come out or appear pro-LGBTQ. Former teacher Pamela said that there was no information in teacher training about how to handle same-sex relationships. Pamela found herself conflicted between identities, telling a student to remove her chest binder when others told her about it but looking for the student privately to check on her afterwards. Pamela was unable to come out to students who were engaging in self-harm over same-sex relationships and was also warned by her colleague not to do so. Yvonne, a lesbian educator, was told by her colleague not to come out or risk being fired.

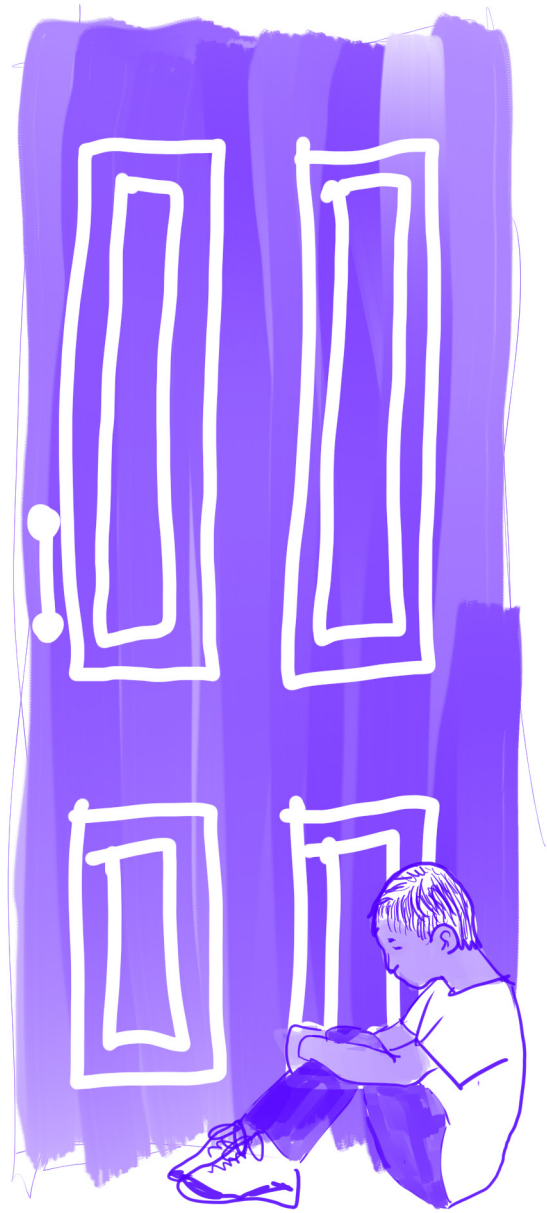
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Bullying by peers was very common among our interviewees and often occurred to those who had visible same-sex relationships or were non-conforming to gender norms. Instead of helping the situation, institutions and educators often engaged in victim-blaming and further punished

LBTQ individuals, forcibly separating same-sex couples and invading their privacy. Schools also policed unconventional gender expression among both students and educators, reinforcing negative stereotypes associated with homosexuality in an attempt to shame non-conforming behaviours. Educators received no guidance on how to handle LBTQ issues and were discouraged from sharing affirmative or even neutral views with students. Information on school policy regarding LBTQ issues was only provided informally, and LBTQ educators felt additional pressure from being told not to come out and were unable to help students in distress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Include positive or neutral information on same-sex relationships in sexuality education curricula.
- Move from an abstinence-only directive to a health-based one that foregrounds the safety and psychological health of children.
- Put in place clear guidelines for staff in educational institutions and a diversity code that includes SOGIESC and implement sensitivity/diversity training programmes.
- Educate teachers and allied educators to fill in training gaps and empower them to speak to LBTQ students, deal with bullying on the basis of SOGIESC, teach about LBTQ issues, and handle LBTQ relationships and troubled teenagers.
- Set up or permit the establishment of LBTQ support groups in Singapore schools, such as gay-straight alliances, to promote awareness and understanding and to lower rates of suicide and bullying.



Chapter 9

EMPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION

Employment discrimination against LBTQ persons has long been a major issue in the global workforce, and companies have been slow to include same-sex partners in human resource policies and to prohibit discrimination based on SOGIESC. The first hurdle the LBTQ employee faces is the hiring process, in which discrimination against gender non-conformity makes it more difficult to get work. After landing a job, employees often remain closeted out of fear of losing their jobs, bullying, or being ostracised by co-workers, which adds unnecessary stress and affects promotion opportunities. A major gap in inclusive benefits and protections for employees has been in healthcare and family care, as employees who cannot be legally married have traditionally been excluded from certain benefits.

The situation is especially dire in Asia. A global study that included 50 countries found that companies in North America were nearly twice as likely as those in Asia to offer the same level of benefits to both LGBTQ and heterosexual employees. Singapore had the lowest score among all the Asian countries surveyed – at 15%.[1]

Significantly, half of the organisations in this study reported that they did not offer equal benefits to LGBTQ employees because of national laws, while one-third cited cultural and societal preconceptions or the company's inability to implement such a benefit plan.[2] In Singapore, as many as 88% of organisations cited legal restrictions in the country, while 41% cited cultural or social perceptions.[3]

Singapore has long adopted the approach of having minimal anti-discrimination laws, citing the inability of legislation to change mindsets.[4] Part of Singapore's economic success story is the discourse that meritocracy has given all Singaporeans equality of opportunity, facilitating upward mobility.[5] Meritocracy is regarded as an important social leveller that has helped its multiracial society to "take a non-discriminatory approach to developing and deploying human resources".[6] Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong has described meritocracy as a "value system by which advancement in society is based on an individual's ability, performance, and

1 Jerene Ang, "Asia lags in offering LGBT employees equal benefits", *Human Resources*, March 30, 2017, http://www.humanresourcesonline.net/asia-lags-in-offering-lgbt-employees-equal-benefits.

2 Miriam Siscovick, "Employers Recognize Importance of LGBT Benefits to Accommodate Evolving Workforce, New Mercer Survey Finds", *Mercer,* March 29, 2017, https://www.mercer.com/newsroom/employers-recognize-importance-of-lgbt-benefits.html.

3 Ang, "Asia lags".

4 Toh Yong Chuan, "Government 'Does Not Entirely Reject' Workplace Anti-Discrimination Laws", *The Straits Times*, May 20, 2013, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/government-does-not-entirely-reject-workplace-anti-discrimination-laws.

5 Kishore Mahbubani, "Why Singapore Is the World's Most Successful Society", *Huffpost*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kishore-mahbubani/singapore-world-successful-society_b_7934988.html.

6 Kenneth Paul Tan, "How Singapore is fixing its meritocracy", *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/04/16/how-singapore-is-fixing-its-meritocracy.

achievement".[7] According to this narrative, everyone is able to succeed regardless of differences, and there should be little need for anti-discrimination laws. In reality, the lack of provision for discrimination based on SOGIESC means that employers can, for instance, dismiss LBTQ individuals without any penalties. The ramifications particularly affect racial minorities who are also LBTQ, as race is also not covered under existing legislation.

In terms of employment, anti-discrimination protections are limited to legislation against age- and gender-based discrimination, as well as harassment and stalking. These laws are the Retirement and Re-employment Act protecting against unlawful dismissal on the grounds of age[8] and the Employment Act[9] (the main labour law), as well as the Child Co-Savings Development Act,[10] which protects against dismissal of female employees during pregnancy. The Protection from Harassment Act criminalises verbal abuse or lewd remarks within and outside the workplace, or any "insulting words or behaviour" that cause "alarm or distress".[11] For other types of workplace discrimination, employees are told to turn to the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP), which is only empowered to mediate and provide advice.[12] On its website, TAFEP explains why Singapore has not adopted anti-discrimination laws: "The experience of other countries is that anti-discriminatory laws alone might not adequately change mindsets in this area. Employment relations are complex, and at the core is the mindsets of both employers and employees. With the support of the Tripartite partners, TAFEP is adopting a promotional and educational approach to tackle the issue of discrimination at the workplace."[13]

It is unclear how these laws apply to SOGIESC, as they do not specifically mention sexual orientation and gender identity. Employers have no legal obligation to follow TAFEP's guidelines.

Although our study uncovered several cases of discrimination in employment related to SOGIESC, there has been no successful case in the Singapore courts challenging such discrimination. In 2013, a Singaporean man brought an action against his employer, alleging that his termination was a case of wrongful dismissal because of his homosexuality (Wee Kim San Lawrence Bernard v Robinson & Co (Singapore) Pte Ltd [2014] SGCA 43). Wee had tendered his resignation and was paid salary in lieu of notice and cash for unconsumed annual leave. He lost the case and his appeal was also dismissed. The High Court judgement noted that Wee had been sufficiently compensated according to legal and contractual obligations and that, therefore, his "allegation that the termination of his employment was because he is a homosexual and the evidence which he was trying to rely on to prove his point were irrelevant".[14] By saying that Wee had already received more than the maximum entitlement allowed for even if he proved his claims, the courts avoided making a judgement about possible persecution based on Wee's sexual orientation. Hence, it remains an open question whether the courts recognise unfair dismissal for SOGIESC-related reasons. At the same time, such court decisions underline the essentially

7 Pravin Prakash, "Understanding meritocracy", *TODAY*, June 25, 2014, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/understanding-meritocracy?singlepage=true.

8 Retirement and Re-employment Act, Singapore, Cap 274A (2012 Rev Ed).

9 Employment Act, Singapore, Cap 91 (2009 Rev Ed) s 81.

10 Child Development Co-Savings Act, Singapore, Cap 38A (2002 Rev Ed).

11 "What Can Victims of Sexual Harassment in Singapore Do?", Singapore Legal Advice, https://singaporelegaladvice.com/law-articles/sexual-harassment-in-singapore-workplace-sexual-harassment.

12 Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices, "Report Discriminatory Employment Practices", https://www.tafep.sg/report-discriminatory-practices.

13 Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices, "Why Is There No Legislation on Workplace Discrimination in Singapore?", https://www.tafep.sg/3-why-there-no-legislation-workplace-discrimination-singapore.

14 Singapore Law Watch, "Wee Kim San Lawrence Bernard v Robinson & Co (Singapore) Pte Ltd [2013] SGHC 279", https://www.singaporelawwatch.sg/Portals/0/Docs/Judgments/[2013]%20SGHC%20279.pdf.

employer-friendly nature of the Singapore courts[15] and the lack of emphasis on anti-discrimination protections, which do not indicate that discrimination based on SOGIESC would be prohibited.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings in employment discrimination were: (1) discriminatory hiring decisions were not reported, (2) LBTQ individuals experienced unfair dismissal and limited career opportunities, and (3) there were attempts to restrict and control their bodies.

1. Discriminatory hiring decisions went unreported

LBTQ individuals faced difficulties in the hiring process when they did not conform to gender stereotypes or pass as heterosexual, or when they were recognised as transgender, hence limiting their job options. This may lead to underemployment and poverty and may occur in both the private and public sectors. Such discrimination is often subtle but may also be explicit. Hiring discrimination is also highly intersectional, being affected by prior factors such as age, race, gender, and educational qualifications on top of the individual's gender conformity – this often results in an opaque hiring/firing process and makes it easier for employers to shift the blame away from their discrimination on the basis of SOGIESC.

In Jo's case, hiring discrimination was evidently linked to her sexuality and gender expression. When she applied for a government defence-related scholarship, she was turned down after a lengthy hiring process during which she was repeatedly asked about her sexuality. She went through an additional four-hour interview, during which a psychologist asked whether she was "open, straight, or gay". The organisation was concerned that Jo appeared gay, and Jo speculated that the organisation was looking for someone who could hide their sexuality. The organisation even called her referees to ask what her sexuality was. Notably, her friend who had lower grades received the scholarship. Jamie also encountered discrimination when she applied to teach in an independent, non-government school in 2014, with the MOE blocking her acceptance even though the school had accepted her. This was because she had written to the press in 2009 when she was in the employ of a government school, advocating for open discourse on sexuality issues. The ministry was concerned that her "interest in this issue would possibly make me a biased advocate, which is seen as very bad in the ministry's eyes".

Even when an organisation denied that it was discriminatory, its behaviour might show otherwise. Pamela had already signed the letter of acceptance for a private firm when she was made to choose between the job and her new relationship with a female employee at the same firm. The man Pamela spoke to claimed that the company would do the same for a heterosexual couple, as they would affect each other's mood, and Pamela decided not to take the job. However, the company later hired the wife of the man who had told her this. The incident occurred although the company generally advocated acceptance of differences.

Hiring discrimination is systemic, extending to self-exclusion from LBTQ individuals themselves based on their perception of stereotypes for job roles. Many interviewees expressed that they felt unable to apply for certain jobs they wanted, as they believed they did not look the part. Fadilah avoided certain jobs that required her to wear dresses; at the same time, employers hiring for jobs that were stereotypically seen as suitable for men would also reject her, as they "needed a real guy".

Transgender individuals have challenges with hiring and firing decisions during their transitioning or if they are perceived to be not passing as their desired gender. Emily, a trans woman, lost her job at a local make-up firm even though she had met the company sales targets. She was also unable to get work in the hospitality industry and was told it was due to her transition from male to female. Shahina was similarly unable to obtain any interviews during her physical transition. She initially lost her job in human resources after a transphobic move by management to block her

15 Herbert Smith Freehills, "Singapore: Court of Appeal Confirms Employer-Friendly Approach to Constructive Dismissal Damages", *Asia Disputes Notes*, http://hsfnotes.com/asiadisputes/2014/10/15/singapore-court-of-appeal-confirms-employer-friendly-approach-to-constructive-dismissal-damages/.

Jo, a young Chinese cisgender lesbian, applied for a scholarship in a high-security civil service role. One of her interviews was by a psychologist who grilled her about her sexuality in a four-hour interview. The psychologist claimed that she could tell the truth if she was gay, but it was widely known by people in the organisation that employees should not come out. Jo felt the interview was a test to see if she could hide her sexuality well enough. She was not given a scholarship, while her friend who had lower grades was offered a place. She was not given a reason for the rejection. Eventually, the organisation told her that she could tell others it was for medical reasons but never gave her the official reason for the rejection. She did not report the case to any authorities, as it might jeopardise her chances of finding a civil service job where she could serve the people in a well-paying role.

from doing company visits or interviews. Serene and Sheila similarly experienced great difficulty in finding work due to prejudice from employers. Poor access to resources for transition merely compounded the problem; Hari, a trans man, could not stay in a job for long, partly because of his bad temper due to high testosterone doses.

None of our interviewees reported the hiring discrimination because they felt that there was no recourse available or did not know of available avenues. Pamela said it did not occur to her and that she did not know it was possible to seek help outside the company. Serene also did not know whom to turn to, as the company that did not confirm her employment due to possible transphobia did not have a human resource department. Weak employee protections in Singapore, combined with a lack of anti-discrimination legislation, result in a vicious cycle of learned helplessness about LBTQ discrimination when it occurs in employment.

2. Unfair dismissal and limited career opportunities

We found that LBTQ employees who were equally capable and worked as hard as other employees were passed over for promotion or threatened with job loss. Discrimination on the job often came from individuals and was enforced by peers, managers, and human resource staff. Similar to hiring discrimination, almost none of these discriminatory decisions were reported or documented. In addition, there was markedly poor job security for LBTQ individuals who were non-conforming in terms of their gender expression. They felt required to hide their sexuality and lived in fear of losing career opportunities when they came out. In particular, trans and gender non-conforming individuals, those who were more out regarding their sexual orientation, and those who advocated for LBTQ people said they felt limited in their careers.

Sahar, who had an education subsidy from the state, wrote about sexuality, race, and religion in an online article. It was reposted on another website without permission, using her real name. After the reposted article was widely shared, Sahar was told by the provider that her subsidy would be revoked and she would have to pay back the sum that had been provided to her if she did not stop her behaviour, which "could potentially bring embarrassment to the public service". When Jamie, a teacher, wrote to the press saying that students should be taught to think critically about sexuality-related topics, she was censured by the school authorities. This subsequently prevented her from getting another teaching job. Trans woman Serene was terminated from her job just before confirmation, as one of her managers was uncomfortable with the fact that she was transgender. However, the choice to stay in the closet about one's sexual orientation has other consequences. Yvonne, another teacher, reported that being closeted limited her ability to socialise with her colleagues, and that this may have affected her career in the school.

On the job, LBTQ individuals felt that they were treated poorly. Amir, a trans man, was told by the head of his department at a mobility company not to be openly gay because "not everyone is open to your lifestyle, some people do find it offensive that you openly talk about your wife and your group of friends, your alternative culture". After his manager heard him telling an old friend about his wife while on the job, Amir's career stagnated. His access to events was blocked, and he was never recognised for his contributions to the company. In another job in a security agency, his mental stability was questioned because he was not heterosexual, and he was asked if life would be better if he had not been "so bold with [his] lifestyle". When his then-girlfriend rejected the advances of Amir's superior, who was sexually harassing her, Amir started getting additional duties and no Sundays off. A combination of sexism and homophobia made Amir's work extremely difficult. He was given twice the workload of his colleagues and was not promoted although he was senior staff and represented his division in multiple areas.

LBTQ employees said that the discriminatory behaviour occurred informally and was not documented in the company's official records. Amir said his mental stability was only questioned in a face-to-face interview and that there was nothing "in black and white". Yvonne, whose manager told her she could not be out in her job, never tried to come out because of this warning. These incidents show the need for a comprehensive anti-discrimination policy in these companies that would directly prevent such discriminatory behaviour. With systemic

anti-LGBTQ laws in place in Singapore, individuals may be encouraged to enforce society's rules against sexual orientation or non-conforming forms of gender expression. Hence, it is necessary to change state and company policies to codify support for different forms of SOGIESC.

3. Restrictions to behaviour and control over the LBTQ body

LBTQ women reported attempts to control their bodies on several levels: physical appearance, including conforming to gender stereotypes; harassment, sexual

> **"In general, if you want to apply for a job, there are those jobs that require you to be feminine. If the job requires me to be feminine, then obviously I won't go. I obviously blacklist that kind of job. And those jobs that I'm more into, those guy jobs, they will say 'Oh I need a guy. I need a real guy'. So it's a bit hard when you're in between."**
>
> *– Fadilah, a cisgender Malay butch lesbian*

or otherwise; and the need for censorship of their views about issues related to SOGIESC, from others and from themselves.

Some of our interviewees reported that they had colleagues or managers who discriminated against them because of their gender non-conforming appearance. A picture of Valerie, a trans woman, was taken while she was in a dress and shown to her boss. The perpetrator asked her boss if he was aware that his employee was "like this". Fortunately for Valerie, her boss was supportive, but the action was an act of policing that might have resulted in Valerie losing her job. Grace, who is masculine-presenting, felt that she was treated differently in her corporate job as she was not a conventionally pretty girl. The partners in the company were known to prefer women who dressed in a sexy way, and Grace felt they talked down to her or were less happy with her work because of her appearance. Grace eventually left to do freelance work. Another interviewee, Cris, also left the service sector, where women are expected to wear skirts and pumps, as she was not able to conform to expectations. Fadilah, who is also masculine-presenting, found that she was more likely to be treated as a man in the jobs she took, but she was seen as being inferior to a cisgender man.

Harassment was a serious problem for many interviewees. Emily said that transgender sex workers such as her were regularly harassed in their work. This made it difficult for Emily to solicit at Changi Village and scared off customers, affecting her income. Transgender people who were not sex workers were also sexually harassed: trans woman Sheila related that she was beaten up by men when she refused to perform sex acts for them. This violence occurred at least three or four times a month and, when reported, the police officer told her not to make it a big issue and said that she was wasting his time. Masculine-presenting Fadilah was sexually harassed by men at her lifeguard job. They tried to flirt with her and told one another that they could make her straight. Fadilah's supervisor even revealed her location to her family after she had left home, causing her to be found by her abusive family.

The perception of and potential for discrimination by colleagues and employers, as well as unequal state and company policies, curtail the freedom of speech of LBTQ individuals and cause them to censor themselves when speaking of SOGIESC-related issues. Many of our interviewees cited the need to self-censor at the workplace. At a multinational technology firm, Joyce was told by her human resource department that she could not start an LGBTQ club in Singapore even though the company had specific clauses against discrimination on the basis of gender and

Grace, who is masculine-presenting and had a corporate job, found that the partners in her office favoured women who dressed in a stereotypically feminine and sexy way. She was not comfortable with presenting herself in that way and found that they behaved differently with her. They talked down to her, were not happy with the way she worked, and generally had different expectations than if she had been a "pretty girl". She left the job and joined a government-run school as a physical education and music teacher. But she experienced discrimination again. The principal of the school called Grace to her office and asked her whether she wore dresses and if she had always had short hair. The principal asked Grace to try wearing a dress and suggested that she wore formal clothes during the assembly period. In her next job as a music teacher, Grace would often meet parents who looked shocked when they first saw her. She suspected that some conservative parents did not want to hire her as a teacher because of her gender expression. She was dismissed a few times without receiving one month's notice. But Grace still preferred freelancing, as it allowed her to choose her clients and avoid the need for feminine clothing.

sexuality. This suggested that the Singapore branch of her multinational corporation was under different restrictions from its international counterparts.

Other LBTQ women who were employees were told not to display their sexuality at work. Nurdiana's colleagues did not want her to bring her female partner to meet them, even at social occasions, because they felt uncomfortable. Nurdiana's bisexuality was also questioned at work and she was asked to make up her mind about whether she liked men or women. Discriminatory comments were made even by LGBTQ-friendly organisations about her identity as Malay, female, and queer.

These restrictions also existed in state-linked organisations. When Pamela was working at a statutory board, it was doing a segment where different people spoke about acceptance and tolerance in relation to minorities. Pamela asked the organisation for permission to present a positive aspect of gay people, but her boss denied her request, conveying this through her supervisor. The supervisor explained that a positive portrayal of LGBTQ people was not aligned with the organisation's values. They could only show gay people in connection with negative topics such as suicide. Various educators in the public school system also reported that even though they had been in a position to speak out and educate others about sexuality, they were silenced and kept from doing their job (see Chapter 8, Education and Schools).

Trans women who served compulsory National Service encountered teasing and harassment from men in army camps. However, our interviewees reported that they also met accepting and kind individuals. Shahina said her campmates joked about touching and raping her, but she did not view this as harassment and said they were generally protective of her. Divya reported instances of being teased for the way she walked. In terms of National Service as an institution, trans women were not allowed to present as a woman while they were serving: Emily said they were not allowed to have long hair or make-up or to wear bras.

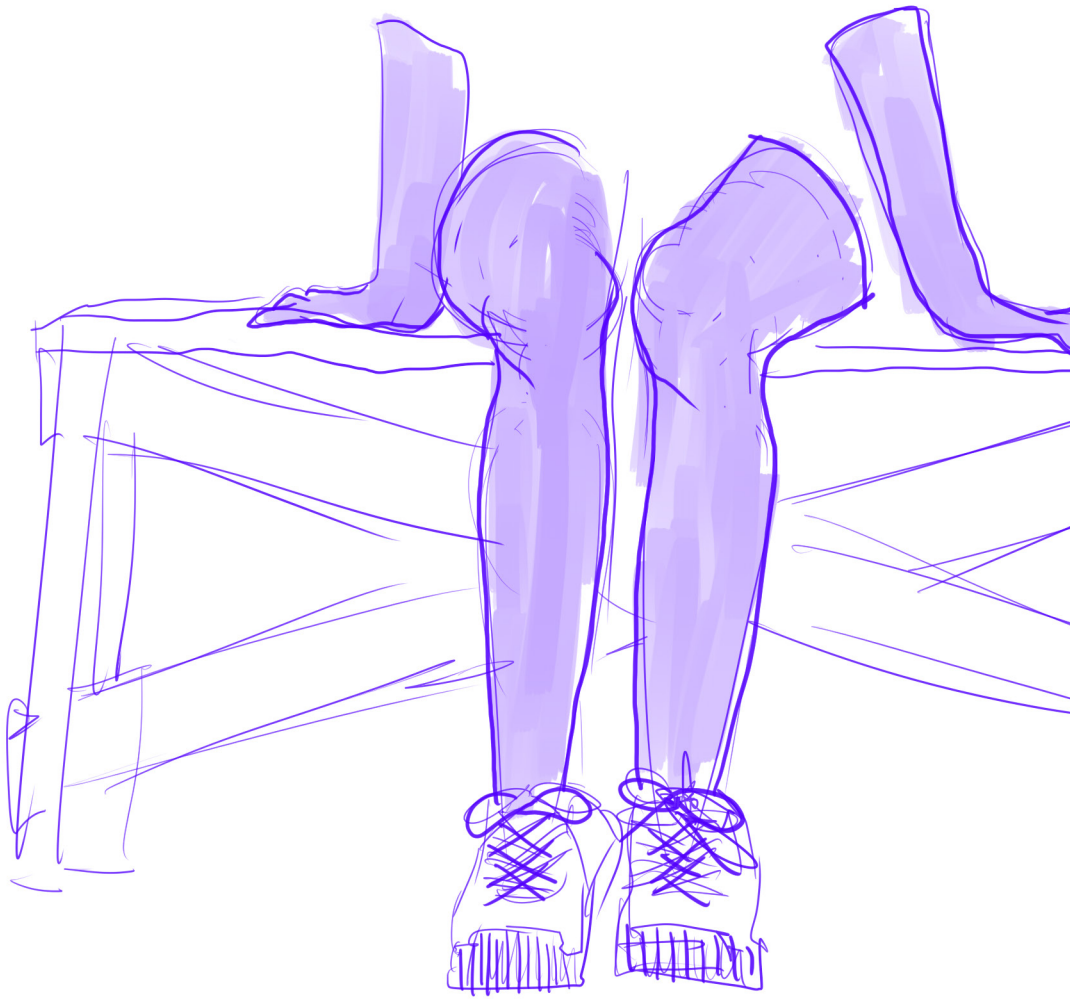
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We found that a range of discriminatory practices in the private and public sector limit the opportunities of LBTQ individuals. LBTQ people had difficulty getting hired when they did not conform to gender stereotypes or pass as heterosexual, or when they were recognised as transgender. These unfair hiring practices were largely unreported, as the individuals involved felt there were no available avenues to seek help or did not know whom to turn to. Employed persons also faced challenges, particularly when they were gender non-conforming. Government employees experienced restrictions, being censured when they openly took a pro-LBTQ stance despite claims that the public service does not discriminate against LBTQ persons. Sexist attitudes frequently prevailed and resulted in LBTQ employees being threatened with job loss or advised not to come out of the closet about their SOGIESC. Even colleagues who were not in a position of power perpetuated the message, sometimes because they knew of similar existing discriminatory practices. Notably, discriminatory behaviour was never documented in company records. Our interviewees also reported that managers and colleagues tried to impose restrictions over their clothing and behaviour. Others experienced mental stress from being unable to disclose their sexualities without risking job loss. Transgender sex workers experienced violence and harassment in their work, yet their police reports were not accepted. Other transgender persons who were not sex workers were also sexually harassed. While serving National Service, transgender women were sometimes teased, sexually harassed, and not allowed to present as women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a strong anti-discrimination framework to protect employees. This should take the form of specific protections for SOGIESC in the Employment Act, as the main labour law in Singapore, along with protections against discrimination based on gender, race, disability, and age.
- Include non-discrimination in human resource policies, including but not limited to termination, hiring, promotion, and compensation.
- Examine and revise how gender and sexuality are constructed in the language of internal and external civil service documents (e.g. avoid terms such as "husband and wife" and include an "other" gender option in forms).

- Set up provisions for whistleblowing to safeguard LBTQ employees who experience discrimination during the hiring or dismissal process or on the job.
- To support these efforts, sensitivity training should also be made mandatory for all hiring managers, starting from the civil service, with simultaneous campaigns to effect mindset changes among the public.
- In National Service, trans women should be allowed to take on roles that most suit their particular skillset, regardless of whether the role is traditionally associated with their gender expression. Support from superiors that extends beyond benign sexism from individuals is required to recognise the personhood of each individual.



Chapter 10

HEALTHCARE

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare in Singapore receives a low level of subsidy from the government, relying instead on a compulsory national medical savings scheme, Medisave,[1] to which Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents contribute 8%–10.5%[2] of their income, depending on age group. Medisave can be used by the individual and those recognised as the individual's family members to cover hospitalisation, day surgery, and selected outpatient costs. Under the national medical savings scheme, Medisave accounts are also used to pay premiums for a basic health insurance plan, MediShield LIFE,[3] that allays the costs of large hospital bills and selected costly outpatient treatments. Notably, outpatient services and follow-up consultations often fall outside claimable costs and deter the low income from seeking medical aid.

In addition, low-income and elderly Singaporeans have subsidies for medical and dental care at general practitioner clinics under the Community Health Assist Scheme,[4] and Singapore citizens who have exhausted other remedies paying for subsidised healthcare bills can apply for assistance from a government endowment fund, Medifund.[5] For those who can afford it, there is the option of purchasing a subsidised private integrated health insurance to replace MediShield LIFE. As these schemes aim to favour Singapore citizens, Permanent Residents receive a slightly lower subsidy than citizens, while foreign workers on work permits are not eligible for these schemes and have to rely on insurance from their employers.

The limitations of the Singapore healthcare system have a greater impact on transgender individuals and those in same-sex relationships, especially individuals who are further disadvantaged by their income status, nationality, race, age, disability, and other exacerbating factors. In order to change the legal sex on their official documents, transgender individuals are required to go through sex reassignment surgery. Hence, those who do not wish to undertake the surgery cannot change their identity markers in official documents. To undergo sex reassignment therapy through the public healthcare system, a process that aligns secondary sex characteristics with the desired gender, transgender men and women need to obtain a letter from a psychiatrist certifying the presence of gender dysphoria before they can see an endocrinologist for hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This is a costly process that is not subsidised by the healthcare system. Transgender individuals may attempt to circumvent this system by seeing general practitioners for hormones or buying their own, a process that has been facilitated by online stores and information from other transgender networks.

Without the benefit of regular monitoring in the form of blood and liver tests by a health professional, undergoing HRT independently carries great risks to

1 Ministry of Health, Singapore, "Medisave", https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/costs_and_financing/schemes_subsidies/medisave.html.

2 Central Provident Fund Board, Singapore, "CPF Contribution and Allocation Rates", https://www.cpf.gov.sg/Employers/EmployerGuides/employer-guides/paying-cpf-contributions/cpf-contribution-and-allocation-rates.

3 Ministry of Health, Singapore, "MediShield Life", https://www.moh.gov.sg/cost-financing/healthcare-schemes-subsidies/medishield-life.

4 Community Health Assist Scheme, "About the Scheme", https://www.chas.sg/content.aspx?id=303.

5 Ministry of Health, Singapore, "Medifund", https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/costs_and_financing/schemes_subsidies/Medifund.html.

health. One well-known risk is the increased incidence of venous thromboembolism among transgender women on oestrogen therapy,[6] which may be associated with a hypercoagulable risk factor, especially the use of ethinyl estradiol.[7] Increased rates of osteopenia have also been found among transgender women who used anti-androgen therapy alone without the concomitant use of oestrogen.[8] An earlier United States review[9] found that to get faster results, many individuals used high-dosage hormone regimens and multiple hormones concurrently without medical supervision.

It is also important to note that the Singapore Medical Council, the statutory board that regulates the conduct and ethics of all registered medical practitioners in Singapore, stated in its 2016 Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines[10] that doctors are to "treat patients without unfair discrimination, prejudice or personal bias against any characteristic of patients, for example, gender, race, religion, creed, social or economic standing, disability or sexual orientation". In addition, doctors should not "allow moral bias or prejudices made on account of patients' habits or lifestyles to influence the way you manage them".

KEY FINDINGS

Our key findings about health-related discrimination and violence were: (1) there were inequalities in accessing healthcare for same-sex couples, (2) transgender individuals may experience serious health risks, (3) insensitive or homophobic behaviour contributed to invisibility of LBTQ persons, and (4) there was a lack of provider and patient knowledge and LBTQ-friendly medical protocol.

1. Inequalities in accessing healthcare for same-sex partners

As same-sex partnerships are not recognised by the state, women who are in de facto partnerships are not entitled to the healthcare financial benefits that are provided to opposite-sex married couples. These include both state and corporate sources of aid: Medisave accounts, on the one hand, and integrated shield plans and workplace insurance with coverage for same-sex families on the other. Those in same-sex relationships are also deprived of the legal right to make healthcare decisions for their partner if no special arrangements are made.

The inability to draw on their own medical savings to help their partner unfairly disadvantages same-sex spouses and others who are in committed relationships. Dee, a cisgender lesbian whose wife is a foreigner, found it difficult to stay in Singapore with her wife because healthcare costs for foreigners were at least three times higher than for citizens. Although Dee made Medisave contributions like any other Singaporean, the couple could not use Dee's Medisave to cover her wife or daughter's healthcare costs, which an opposite-sex married couple would have been able to do. This imposed "a substantial burden" on the family and Dee expressed that she felt her wife and daughter would always be treated as foreigners.

In most companies, due to lack of recognition of same-sex partnerships, workplace health insurance that is meant to benefit employees' spouses does not extend to same-sex partners in Singapore. Adibah noted that her long-term partner of 11 years could not benefit from her workplace insurance. Similarly, private health insurance plans purchased by individuals typically do not recognise couples who are not legally married. Anita, who identifies as queer and female, had to list her partner as a good friend in her insurance policy in order to make her partner a beneficiary.

The lack of legal status results in many other issues for LBTQ partners who seek access to healthcare.

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6 Nelson F. Sanchez, John P. Sanchez, and Ann Danoff, "Health Care Utilization, Barriers to Care, and Hormone Usage Among Male-to-Female Transgender Persons in New York City", *American Journal of Public Health* 99, no. 4 (2009): 713-719.

7 Jamie D. Weinand and Joshua D. Safer, "Hormone Therapy in Transgender Adults Is Safe with Provider Supervision; A Review of Hormone Therapy Sequelae for Transgender Individuals", *Journal of Clinical & Translational Endocrinology* 2, no. 2 (2015): 55-60.

8 Ibid.

9 Sanchez et al., "Health Care Utilization".

10 Singapore Medical Council, "Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines", http://www.healthprofessionals.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider2/guidelines/2016-smc-ethical-code-and-ethical-guidelines---(13sep16).pdf?sfvrsn=80e05587_2.

Hospital policies allow only legally recognised relatives to accompany a patient to stay overnight in the ward. Trans man Amir's partner was not allowed to stay with him in the hospital. In another incident, a medical officer at the National Kidney Foundation asked Amir why he was not married, as his mother would get more subsidies if he had been married. Adibah, who was accompanying her ill partner in the hospital, was regarded as a friend and not a spouse by medical workers. At the time of the interview, Adibah was concerned about end-of-life issues; her partner (a Singapore Permanent Resident) was previously hospitalised for cancer and she knew she would have no control over her medical decisions.

2. Serious health risks for transgender persons

Transgender respondents reported that it was extremely difficult to access locally based aid for transitioning and often found their own resources through informal or online networks. This was due to a combination of two factors: the perception that healthcare providers would not be able to provide suitable and sensitive care, and the lack of subsidies for the transition process from the state. Costs were high and there was no financial help during and after the transition, when assistance might be needed for medical and/or psychological problems.

Some respondents reported that costs were prohibitive for them, which sometimes resulted in serious risks to health. Having no access to subsidies for their sex reassignment surgery, both Emily and Shahina went to Thailand for surgery, as costs were much cheaper there. Shahina said that psychiatrist fees for a year would be very expensive and she did not try to transition via the official route. Similarly, knowing that it would be expensive to have the procedure done in Singapore, Emily never attempted to approach any doctors in Singapore about it. After the operation, she purchased hormones from local general practitioners that she knew of from her friends. Such clinics are a very helpful resource for transgender persons in Singapore in terms of hormone provision, but it is doubtful that they can provide adequate advice on hormone ingestion or specialist follow-up care should any health problems occur, such as post-surgery complications.

Transgender women who did not want sex reassignment surgery were left with even less choice if they did not have the financial resources. Since the path to obtaining hormones in Singapore requires the person to desire surgery, someone who does not want the operation cannot obtain them. In this situation, Serene had to find her own sources. She visited general practitioner clinics and received some Unijab injections (a progesterone). However, these doctors were not experts in transitioning: when Serene wanted an anti-androgen injection, her doctor had no knowledge of it, and she took the initiative to print a stack of literature for him. The doctor wrote the prescription and she went to a private hospital to buy the medication, where she found out that it was too expensive for her in the long term.

But there were dangers of taking medication through the general practitioner route. Serene's doctor gave her both injections and oral doses. One night, she felt that she could not breathe and broke out in a cold sweat. Thinking that she was dying, she kept pacing, convinced that she would die if she fell asleep. Even so, Serene did not return to the doctor who prescribed the medication, knowing that he would deny any liability. She stopped the injections after that, found out what hormones she needed from an online forum, bought the medication herself and took care of her own injections. Exorbitant costs were an ongoing issue for Serene and other transgender women who could not find regular work. She took a lower dosage of a hormone than she needed, leading to brittle bones and contributing to her multiple fractures following a fall. Serene needed back surgery and was hospitalised for a period of time for the multiple fractures.

State assistance is also not available to transgender people earlier in the transitioning journey. Valerie, a trans woman who was a long-time Singapore Permanent Resident, said that when she wanted to learn about transgender issues many years ago, there was only one copy of the book she wanted in the library. When she tried to find the three doctors whom she knew performed sex reassignment surgery, one had passed away, another had migrated to Canada, and only one psychiatrist was still practising and could do her psychiatric evaluation.

3. Insensitive and homophobic behaviour contributes to LBTQ invisibility

We found that LBTQ individuals are largely invisible in the healthcare system: LBTQ persons often do not come out to their healthcare providers and healthcare workers do not create an affirming climate that helps them to do so, even displaying homophobic behaviour that further discourages LBTQ persons from speaking frankly about their sexuality. Consequently, the needs of these patients go unmet, and when their health issues surface, healthcare providers are surprised because they have not encountered similar problems, a result of the invisibility of LBTQ issues in healthcare.

Upon disclosure of their sexuality, some doctors discriminated against LBTQ patients, ranging from unprofessional behaviour to outright denial of service. Sheila, a trans woman, saw her doctor for a recurrent urinary tract infection. Once he knew she was transgender, the doctor told her she kept getting urinary tract infections because she had HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and asked her to check. She was furious and got tested to show him that her result was negative.

Nurdiana went to her gynaecologist, who was in private practice, to get herself checked for urinary tract infections after her then-partner contracted it. She had been visiting that doctor for a few years by that point, and had first seen this doctor when she was with a man. When Nurdiana told her in a straightforward way that she was going out with a woman who had a urinary tract infection, the gynaecologist asked her to repeat that. They then had a heated discussion in which the gynaecologist said she did not believe in Nurdiana's lifestyle and asked her to change gynaecologists. During that visit, Nurdiana also wanted the gynaecologist to change her intrauterine device, which would cost her an additional S$800. But the gynaecologist asked her why she needed to change the intrauterine device, then advised her to remove it entirely even though Nurdiana still wanted that birth control measure in place. Sarah's gynaecologist similarly did not seem to understand at first when she told him that she was not having sex with men, and she had to explain that she was having sex with women. He then advised, incorrectly, that she had no need for a Pap smear, and she had to point out that acquiring a human papillomavirus infection was still a possibility.

Such negative experiences only serve to drive LBTQ people deeper into the closet. For example, Ash, a queer cisgender woman who presented as masculine, said she would go to polyclinics (a form of state healthcare) without disclosing her sexual orientation, lying that she was not sexually active. She withheld this information when her father was present and also when she was alone. Ash revealed that she did not "trust doctors to stick to their oath, that they don't discriminate and just heal". She had also heard that a doctor had questioned her ex-partner regarding her sexuality, saying things such as "you're either straight or a lesbian". Hence, even though Ash knew she needed a cervical cancer injection, she looked it up on the Internet instead of asking any medical professionals about it. Another interviewee, Yvonne, was wary of using her Medisave to see a psychiatrist in case she was outed and fired from her job in the education system.

Being at the intersection of several minority identities means that one's sexuality becomes even more invisible in healthcare. Rachel, a queer Chinese woman with a disability, said doctors were sometimes "extra nice" to her, "almost patronising", as if she was fragile, and that people in general never saw her sexuality as foremost, but "maybe saw the chair before anything else".

Transgender individuals who had not changed their legal gender marker experienced insensitivity towards and erasure of their gender identities when they visited healthcare institutions. Divya, a trans woman who had legally changed her sex, was assumed to be cisgender in the documents she had to sign to authorise her surgery. When she told hospital staff that she was transgender, a Philippines nurse called her a "*bakla*", or Tagalog for gay man, and insisted that they had to write "T" for transgender on the records to inform the doctors. Divya was very angry to hear this, as her sex had legally been changed on official documents. The approach of this healthcare worker reflected a lack of training in LBTQ-affirmative medical treatment. Her behaviour was seen as yet another act of misgendering for Divya.

Although not declaring transgender status carries health risks, it is the responsibility of healthcare workers to be sensitive to the needs of gender non-conforming patients. Shahina, a post-operative transgender woman, also affirmed that telling healthcare personnel that she had undergone sex

reassignment surgery was traumatic for her, because she had to relive her misery again. Similarly, Serene, a pre-operative trans woman who did not desire sex reassignment surgery, was addressed by her male name when visiting a state hospital. Before a back operation, she was asked to wait in a six-bed men's ward for an hour or two. During other hospital stays, she was given a single-bed ward even though she was not paying the single rate.

In contrast, trans man Sharif related his excellent experience doing a Pap smear at a university in the United States. The doctor's first action was to ask how Sharif wanted to be addressed and what his preferred pronouns were. The doctor also checked if Sharif had been penetrated before and apologised for having to do that for the test. Sharif's university provided HRT for free, with monitoring by doctors, a clear contrast to the non-gender-sensitive experience in Singapore's state healthcare.

In the area of psychiatric support, several of our interviewees who reached out for assistance encountered counsellors who took a negative approach towards LBTQ identities. Given the lack of queer-affirming information in everyday life, the lack of sensitive support from mental healthcare providers is extremely harmful for LBTQ persons. When Jamie approached an area-based counselling service in 2007 for her anger management issues, the leading counsellor told her that it was not a big problem and that since Jamie was already aware of her anger issues, she could deal with them on her own. Jamie was told that she needed to take steps to calm herself down. However, the counsellor said she could address the gay problem if Jamie wanted, suggesting that she saw being queer as the problem and not the anger. Fortunately, Jamie was well enough at the time to recognise that the counsellor should not have said that and simply stopped using the service.

In the case of Yvonne, the public sector psychiatrist she saw provided inadequate help and failed to address the issue of her abusive relationship, showing that a seemingly LBTQ-neutral stance might be equally harmful for LBTQ patients. Yvonne presented the psychiatrist's attitude as accepting and was very grateful for his help in resolving her depression over work issues while being neutral towards her same-sex relationship. However, she also said: "He didn't really probe too much about it, on hindsight. He accepted it. He asked me a little bit about it, but he never suggested, he never probed in that direction what I should do with this destructive, unhealthy relationship."

"I went for the surgery but these people don't know I'm a transgender, so all the procedures were female procedures. So I felt something is wrong, all the procedures were female procedures. They have to sign all the documents and all that. When these people asked me one question, when was the last menstruation, I kept quiet. How many times must I tell these people?"
– Divya, who was very uncomfortable with the hospital's insensitive protocol

4. Lack of provider and patient knowledge and LBTQ-friendly medical protocol

The experiences of LBTQ individuals showed that in some instances, healthcare professionals lacked knowledge of how to treat LBTQ patients. At the same time, LBTQ patients who were used to an unsupportive climate were unaware of their right to non-discrimination as patients. The awareness level of the necessity for gynaecological checks and tests for sexually transmitted diseases was also low among our LBTQ interviewees.

One doctor who showed ignorance of lesbian sexual health was Sarah's gynaecologist, who told her, incorrectly, that she did not need a Pap smear as she was having sex with women and not men. When she

asked him about human papillomavirus infections, he acknowledged that it could happen if she was having sex with someone who had had sex with a man. He only agreed to give her the Pap smear after that. This gynaecologist was highly recommended and came from a reputable medical centre, so she found his ignorance of lesbian health appalling. For this reason, as well as unrelated misdiagnoses, Sarah said she avoided doctors, although she knew that she should see a gynaecologist more often. Cisgender lesbian Yvonne also said that when she requested a Pap smear, the doctor asked her if she was married. When Yvonne said no, the doctor said that she did not need a Pap smear. These doctors did not provide their patients with the choice to do a Pap smear even though there was a possible health risk. On top of that, most lesbian and bisexual women fail to reveal their sexual orientation to healthcare personnel out of fear of discrimination, increasing the possibility of an incorrect diagnosis.

At least one transgender woman, Serene, revealed that she had had to teach her doctor about possible drugs she could be taking for HRT, printing out a stack of materials for him that she found on the Internet. Her doctor showed a worrying lack of expertise towards transgender-specific healthcare, yet many transgender patients may feel that they have no choice but to continue receiving their medication from general practitioners.

Medical protocols followed by healthcare workers were sometimes problematic, especially for transgender women. Shahina and Divya both reported that they were highly uncomfortable with revealing their transgender status and kept it to themselves until they had to answer a question about their last menses or pregnancy. They answered the question under duress and were forced to relive the trauma of their gender dysphoria during this pre-surgery medical protocol. This is one area where Singapore institutions can learn from the experience of LBTQ-sensitive healthcare institutions overseas.

From our interview with a junior doctor in a public institution, when asking about a patient's medical history, the first question about marriage should ideally be followed by a question about sexual intercourse. The doctor, who had been posted to a gynaecological department for a brief time, also said that she had occasionally changed the question to ask whether the patient had had penetrative sex if she suspected they might be sexually active, instead of assuming that sex implied penetration. Such sexual orientation-sensitive behaviour may encourage patients to be more honest about their sexuality. Unfortunately, the lack of suitable training and encouragement leaves questions up to the individual doctor's discretion.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

There are significant barriers to healthcare for LBTQ women and transgender men. Women in same-sex relationships encounter financial and legal inequalities when accessing both public and private healthcare services, as their relationships are not legally recognised in Singapore. They are unable to draw on their own medical savings to help their partners, are unprotected by workplace health insurance that covers legal spouses, and are not able to stay with their spouses in public hospital wards. Transgender men and women face unsubsidised high costs of transitioning, which leads to serious health risks when they turn to uncertified online sources for HRT or the medical advice of non-specialists. For trans men and women who do not want to proceed with sex reassignment surgery, there are few sources of aid and no recourse to change their legal gender marker.

Healthcare workers lacked knowledge of how best to treat LBTQ patients and gave incorrect medical advice to those with same-sex partners and transgender persons. In turn, LBTQ individuals expected homophobic and transphobic behaviour and did not come out to their healthcare providers, hence remaining invisible. Other healthcare workers displayed transphobic or insensitive behaviour and clearly lacked training in LBTQ issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise de facto relationships so that people in same-sex relationships can be accounted for in the healthcare support system.
- Mandate LBTQ sensitivity training for all healthcare professionals in Singapore, integrating it into every module that trainees (e.g. nurses and doctors) go through. This includes education on the nuances of gender diversity and the specific health concerns of LBTQ persons.
- Include sensitive care and non-discrimination in the professional medical standards and protocols of every healthcare institution, with disciplinary action for healthcare workers who fail to meet these standards.
- Include transgender care in public and private health schemes such as Medisave, MediShield, and integrated shield plans.

Chapter 11

PUBLIC SPACE

INTRODUCTION

LBTQ individuals experience violence in a number of public spaces in Singapore. These include everyday spaces such as the bus, train, public toilets, void decks, the streets, and spaces in front of malls. The acts of violence take multiple forms and escalate depending on where LBTQ individuals are. The more out of place the presentation of their non-normative identities was, the more the violence escalated. There are also context-specific factors that influence the type of violence they experience. For example, whether the public space is crowded or deserted, online or offline, and whether it is a space that is LBTQ-friendly. We maintain that while there are more opportunities for LBTQ individuals to be present in public spaces today (e.g. Pink Dot and LBTQ-friendly shops, cafes and workplaces), the space-specific nature of the violence they experience is reflective of the hatred and discrimination that persists in their lives. Without equal access to public space, LBTQ individuals' visibility is diminished, and their ability to influence the public sphere through more inclusive and positive self-representation is also compromised.

KEY FINDINGS

There are two key findings this section addresses: (1) the violence experienced by LBTQ individuals in public escalates depending on where they are, and (2) experiences of offline violence and how violence connects the online and offline worlds of individuals.

1. Violence escalates when LBTQ bodies are out of place

The everyday experiences of LBTQ individuals show that public space is not emotionally, psychologically, and physically safe for them. They experience staring, name-calling, physical threats, and physical violence. LBTQ individuals who presented as having non-normative sexuality or gender non-conformity were more likely to seem out of place and thus more likely to experience escalated abuse and violence. The experience of being in public space was seen to be particularly challenging for trans persons, women who presented as more masculine, and individuals who were transitioning from male to female or female to male. They were also the most likely to experience sexual harassment or threats of physical violence, and actual physical and sexual violence in public spaces.

Individuals who presented with non-conforming gender and sexuality reported that they were more likely to get stared at in public spaces. The staring often escalated when they were out in public with their partner. This made them feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Staring was more common when they travelled on public transportation (e.g. buses and trains) but was also experienced in public toilets. LBTQ individuals who dressed in clothes associated with another gender or were in an early phase of transitioning were more likely to be stared at. For example, Valerie said that after she transitioned, the staring stopped.

In addition to staring, LBTQ individuals also experienced verbal abuse. For example, Fadilah and her partner were called "Lesbo! Lesbo!" at the Yishun bus interchange by a group of seven Indian men. Fadilah said that she and her partner were not holding hands, merely carrying a large bag between them. Amir similarly reported that he had been called "tomboy" and "disgusting" in public. In some instances, the verbal abuse was not in the form of name-calling but in ways that admonished or scolded the LBTQ individual for not conforming to gender norms and expectations. For example, Elaine said that once in a taxi, the driver told her, "nowadays girls don't know how to be girl; boy don't know how to be boy". He continued to lecture her on the importance of getting

married and fulfilling her gender roles. Similarly, Sheila, Hari, and Divya, all trans individuals, said they were called "*bapok*" (derogatory Malay word for effeminate male or transvestite). Sheila said that she was called "*ah kua*" (derogatory Hokkien word for transvestite) on the MRT train and also ridiculed in shopping malls by cashiers. Sarah was called "lesbian" by men in passing vehicles while walking along the street.

A key issue that surfaced among most of the interviewees was the difficulty they faced using the women's public toilets. LBTQ individuals who did not present as cisgender women were chased out of toilets or verbally abused when they tried to use the women's public toilet. This proved to be quite stressful for the individuals we interviewed. Elaine and Sheila, both trans women, faced difficulty using the women's public toilet. Elaine said that she was afraid to enter women's public toilets, as she and her friends had been chased out before. Divya, also a trans woman, missed her flight because she was asked to leave the women's public toilet at the airport. She had entered into an altercation with an airport security guard who refused to let her use the toilet. Fadilah and Cris, who were not trans, were also asked to leave the women's toilets. Cris was asked to get out of the female-only line for the public toilet at an airport in the Middle East. She had to lift her shirt to show that she was a woman.

In some instances, LBTQ individuals experienced more overt threats in public. Pamela, who presented as more masculine, said that once when she was out with her partner, a group of men shouted, "you haven't seen a dick yet". She lived in fear of violence and rape when out in public and was worried that she would not be able to protect herself or her partner. Women who do not conform in appearance to gender norms and stereotypes are more likely to experience physical violence and sexual attacks, especially in deserted places. For example, Valerie, who could not pass as a cisgender woman, used the men's toilet. While in the toilet, a man tried to force himself into Valerie's cubicle. The man was unzipping his fly, but Valerie managed to push him away. At that point, other people entered the toilet, and the man left her alone. Valerie said she felt scared and violated. For a while, she continued to use male toilets but avoided going to deserted ones in MRT stations. After she transitioned, however, Valerie used only the women's toilet.

The experience for trans women is equally dangerous. Trans women like Sheila and Serene reported being stalked and attacked in public. Sheila said that she was sexually harassed in public by a man who kept signalling to her to give him oral sex. Sheila said that trans women are often seen as sex objects and when they are out in public, especially in deserted places, they are often sexually harassed or attacked. Serene also reported that she was attacked and forced to perform oral sex near Victoria Memorial Hall in 1989. It was quiet and deserted when the incident occurred. She managed to escape by biting her assailant but not before he punched her. There were traces of blood on her torn dress and bruises on her thighs. After the incident, Serene was more careful of where she walked in public, especially when she was alone. Serene avoided cruising spots in particular. Divya, also a trans woman, was molested on a public bus by a man who rubbed her breast. She said, "They think we [trans women] are easy targets."

Even when gender non-conforming women are not alone and in semi-public spaces like clubs or even the streets, where there are others around them, they live with the threat of sexual assault. Alison, who is butch, was attacked by a gang of Chinese men. They picked on her because she was the largest in the group. No one in her group could help her, and no passers-by stepped in to help, instead standing by to watch the fight or leaving the scene. Similarly, Divya and Elaine reported that they were molested in clubs. Divya said that she has had her private parts pinched and groped in clubs, while Elaine said a man put his hand up her shirt once, and another hugged her from behind and then walked away.

2. Acts of violence connect online and offline worlds

Cyberspace or the online world provides LBTQ individuals with opportunities to meet and connect with others in the community. It is an important virtual community space where individuals can find out about LBTQ-friendly spaces and service providers, make friends, and date without having to meet face-to-face. Online, individuals may make use of a pseudonym, and for those LBTQ individuals who are not ready to come out or those who are still questioning their sexuality, it provides a safe space in which to find out more about non-normative sexualities and also learn more about the community. In addition, online spaces provide an important avenue for LBTQ activist groups

and other members of civil society working to increase the visibility of and support for the LBTQ community. To this end, online spaces are crucial for intensifying LBTQ presence in the public sphere and make it possible for individuals to comment on what it means to be LBTQ in Singapore and also participate in public debates on matters that influence their lives.

However, in spite of these positive outcomes and avenues for LBTQ individuals to occupy and participate in the public sphere, cyberspace is also a place where individuals encounter cyber-bullying and other threats to the safe spaces they carve out for themselves by keeping separate their virtual/online and real/offline lives. For example, Sahar said that an online article she wrote while overseas about being a lesbian was reproduced and circulated in Singapore. Her real name was revealed and people connected to her immediate family in Singapore found out about her sexuality. Her parents became angry with her for what they perceived to be the public shame this brought to the family, as others now knew about her sexuality. For Sahar, the Internet was no longer a safe space where she could write about what bothered her, or share with others regarding issues of sexuality. Even if she wrote using a pseudonym, there would be a possibility that someone would know it was her and reveal her identity, which had happened in this case.

Similarly, Anita said that LBTQ offline spaces are skewed in favour of those who are completely out. She argued that you could go to a club or party and there might be videotaping without consent at these events. She was afraid that this could compromise the safety of LBTQ individuals who are not out, especially those who are civil servants or public figures. Anita said that after making comments online regarding the AWARE saga, she was harassed by a member of the public on Facebook who tagged the Prime Minister's Office in a post about Anita and her 'moonlighting' to return the previous executive committee of AWARE to power. AWARE had been taken over by members of a group who believed AWARE had become pro-LGBTQ and that this was not in keeping with Singapore's traditional, heteronormative society. Comments made about Anita misrepresented her, and the person who posted about her used photographs of her at Pink Dot to accuse her of being pro-LGBTQ and discredit her, saying that she was "not adhering to civil servants' code of conduct" and that she was "corrupt and a loose cannon".

Once interviewees' sexualities were exposed online, they continued to be harassed online. This was the case for both Sahar and Anita, and also for Gina and Hari. For Gina and Hari, the perpetrators were people they met or knew offline who messaged and harassed them online once they found out about their sexuality. Hari, a trans man, and his girlfriend were repeatedly harassed online by his girlfriend's ex-boyfriend, who objected to Hari dating her. The ex even came to Hari's workplace and threatened to beat him up. The fact that much of our personal information (e.g. where we work, who we hang out with, where we are) can be found online (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) makes it easier for people to find out about individuals like Hari and for the online harassment and threats to be taken offline. As such, while cyberspace and an online presence allow LGBTQ individuals to participate in the public sphere, exercise their right to a social life, and feel part of a larger community, this presence also means they are vulnerable to online harassment and cyber-bullying. This is particularly risky for individuals who are not out to family or at their workplace.

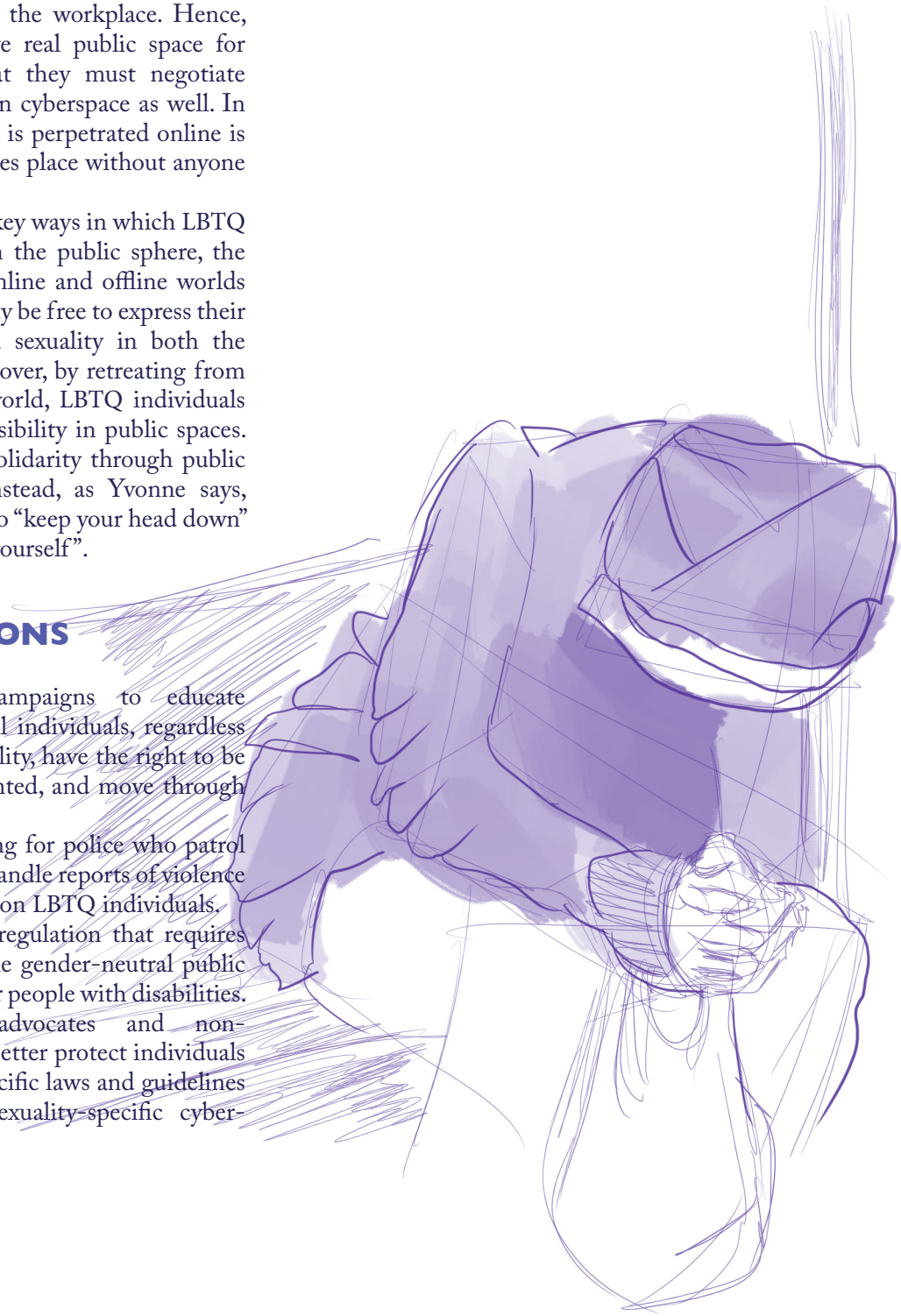
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The right to be included in the public sphere is an important part of being recognised by society. Such inclusion gives one the right to participate in public discourse and to become an active agent in society. This agency is especially important for marginalised groups such as LBTQ persons who may lack adequate representation in more formal institutions. Those excluded from the public sphere find their right to public space curtailed.

Our interviews have shown that LBTQ individuals are unable to access public spaces without fear of violence or discrimination. Those who present as gender non-conforming or as having non-normative sexualities are more likely to experience violence and discrimination in public spaces. In such a context, online spaces become key spaces for LGBTQ individuals to express their gender and sexuality, as well as to connect with others in the hope of forming intimate partnerships and/or communities. However, the threat of cyber-bullying, harassment, and being forced out of the closet remains very real. This can impact familial relationships when LBTQ individuals

are not out to their family. In some instances, LBTQ individuals fear that their employers could find out about their non-normative SOGIESC and that this would disadvantage them in the workplace. Hence, some LBTQ individuals leave real public space for cyberspace only to find that they must negotiate violence and discrimination in cyberspace as well. In addition, the harassment that is perpetrated online is more insidious, as it often takes place without anyone knowing.

While online spaces are key ways in which LBTQ individuals can participate in the public sphere, the very tenuous separation of online and offline worlds means that they can never truly be free to express their non-conforming gender and sexuality in both the real and virtual worlds. Moreover, by retreating from public space to the online world, LBTQ individuals also sacrifice their right to visibility in public spaces. The potential for collective solidarity through public visibility is curtailed and instead, as Yvonne says, LBTQ individuals are forced to "keep your head down" and "don't draw attention to yourself".



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop and fund campaigns to educate Singapore society that all individuals, regardless of their gender and sexuality, have the right to be who they are, be represented, and move through public space safely.
- Provide sensitivity training for police who patrol public spaces on how to handle reports of violence or harassment enacted upon LBTQ individuals.
- Implement and enforce regulation that requires all buildings to have some gender-neutral public toilets similar to toilets for people with disabilities.
- Work with LBTQ advocates and non-governmental groups to better protect individuals in online spaces, with specific laws and guidelines to stop gender- and sexuality-specific cyber-bullying.

Chapter 12

COPING & HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

INTRODUCTION

In the face of homelessness, structural and interpersonal violence, loss of employment, and other disruptive and violent events, we found that LBTQ people showed remarkable agency, independence, and resilience in negotiating, strategising, and surviving these experiences. They reached out, cultivated, and sustained support networks for themselves and people around them. Reaching out to LGBTQ organisations, they took steps to ensure their health and well-being. They sought alternative care and used visibility as a tool of empowerment with state and private care providers. Others used stealth or chose not to disclose their SOGIESC as a means of coping. Yet others turned to more harmful ways of coping such as substance abuse, addictive behaviours, and enacting violence on themselves and others. Given the constant policing of gender norms, the ability to imagine life as a person who does not conform to traditional gender roles and norms was limited for some of our respondents, which contributed to low morale, depression, and a desire to leave the country.

KEY FINDINGS

The following findings stood out for us in our overview of interviewees' coping and help-seeking behaviour: (1) support networks play a critical role in LBTQ people's lives and are key to their immediate safety, (2) LGBTQ-friendly workplaces can be life-changing for LBTQ persons, though the reverse frequently applies, (3) some moved out of their homes or even the country for self-preservation, (4) others sought support from health providers, (5) coping sometimes meant going back into the closet and conforming to gender roles, and (6) reporting or seeking assistance was uncommon.

1. Support networks key to safety and well-being

Support networks in LGBTQ communities are almost exclusively outside the biological family structure. They are crucial for a sense of well-being, self-esteem, purpose, and community, and can have a long-lasting impact on mental health and identity. For LBTQ individuals, social networks include partners, ex-partners, friends, schoolmates, colleagues, volunteers within LBTQ organisations, and people they meet online. These are especially necessary when an LBTQ person's identity is being formed and they are first coming out to themselves and others.

Friends and social networks are an immediate resource for assistance, since there are no emergency shelters for LBTQ children and youth, and can be life-saving. Dee's friends helped her to find a place to stay after she left home due to an abusive situation. Likewise, Jyoti received help from friends who offered her a place to stay. She felt free and liberated, as "both external and internal world could co-exist together", and she was not controlled by others. Within the transgender sex worker community, social networks are major sources of support. Divya ran away from home at a young age and finding older transgender sisters, who shared housing and health information as well as resources on transitioning, surviving, and finding work as a trans woman, was critical for her.

Interviewees cited the importance of being supported by LBTQ friends, even if it was an online

community. Alison felt that she had found a small family when she went online and found a lesbian community on Internet Relay Chat channels. Sahar, who only found a community later, said it would have "made a world of difference" in her earlier years to have people to confide in. Many of her friends in secondary school were homophobic, and she was unable to confide in them. Gina similarly wished that she had had community support.

"I think it would be so much more helpful if I had access to a community at that point. Especially for people who are teenagers and queer and it's so hard for them to find support or to feel like they have concerns and needs that are different from the rest of the population."
– Gina, who was filmed without her consent and forced to leave her school

2. Support from LGBTQ-friendly workplaces

Institutional support, especially in the workplace, was life-changing for some of our interviewees. For example, Anita shared about how she sought assistance from a non-governmental organisation she volunteered with, especially relating to legal advice on how to pursue a sexual harassment case that she was unable to report to the police. Kalinda was also immensely supported at her workplace, which granted her a transfer request and offered protection when her abusive mother was looking for her – her managers tried to hide her and scolded her mother. For Nadia, who came out at work in a multinational corporation with a progressive work culture, it was like "coming home" and "finding a second mum" in her boss, who supported her transfer overseas so that she could live with her partner, away from potential violence from her religious Muslim family.

However, workplaces are not always friendly, and being visible as transgender or gender non-conforming results in high levels of unemployability. For trans women like Divya, Shahina, Serene, Sheila, and Emily, coping with unemployability due to high levels of employment discrimination meant seeking employment in various forms of sex work. Working in brothels, streetwalking, and online sex work involve high levels of risk and precarity in the form of health risks and exposure to sexually transmitted infections. In addition, they are also exposed to violent gangs patrolling red light districts, constant financial pressure from brothel owners and landlords, clients who can be physically, sexually, and financially violent, and the constant threat of violence, arrest, and detention in raids and patrols conducted by police officers.

3. Distancing from unhealthy families

A frequent coping strategy was avoidance: moving away from the difficult situation physically or emotionally, or out of the country entirely. Nearly half of our interviewees moved away from their disapproving biological families, sometimes involuntarily even before financial independence.

Staying away from the family home was a way for individuals to protect themselves emotionally and physically by avoiding potential conflict. Nic moved out while she was still in school to get away from her abusive mother, selling things online to support herself financially. Kalinda also moved out and became estranged from her family. Pamela took steps to make sure her violent brother did not know of her whereabouts after she had moved out. Sharif had stayed away from home since he was 18, claiming that it was more comfortable that way. Aisha also said that she avoided her family and eventually saw less of her extended family and parents. Sarah, whose mother tried exorcism on her, moved from one rental flat to another instead of remaining in an unwelcoming home. Elaine, who was locked into her room by her mother, climbed out from a fifth-storey window in a literal attempt to escape from home. Others saw

better opportunities elsewhere with fewer restrictions – Nadia left Singapore for Australia, and Chandra was also looking for a way to leave the country.

However, escape from situations such as these and distancing themselves from family meant that LBTQ people have less access to family resources. For example, Jaya made a concerted effort to remain outside her home to avoid her father, to the extent that she felt she "was being orphaned at that point of time", as he was her "only functional parent". Moving out and away from family members was a common experience for many interviewees, especially in the absence of protection and shelter for LBTQ victims of violence and discrimination.

4. Limited support from health professionals

It was notable that our interviewees had mixed success in seeking help from health service providers such as psychiatrists and counsellors (see Chapter 6, Psychological Well-Being, and Chapter 10, Healthcare). Some interviewees expressed that they sought and successfully received professional help for their issues but did not disclose their LBTQ identity throughout the sessions. We can only speculate that these individuals did not feel comfortable with disclosure due to the environment created by the professional and/or their own perception of the stigma associated with their minority identity. Others revealed their LBTQ identity but were not met with an affirming stance. Yvonne's psychiatrist, Gina's counsellor, and Belinda's psychologist did not address their client's sexual orientation although it was central to the issues they were having, while Jamie's counsellor suggested that being queer was the problem. In contrast, Dee's counsellor was helpful, but she was not open to receiving help at the time.

5. Violence of the closet

For other LBTQ people, coping meant going back into the closet. Some 'went stealth', taking precautions not to disclose or to control who potentially knew about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Others, believing their lives would improve or fearing discrimination and violence, held back from speaking up or taking a stand, and withstood abuse and discrimination without fighting back. All of these choices can negatively impact their psychological health and well-being.

Anita, who was harassed online for debating LGBTQ issues, changed her online gender identity to male and Chinese to feel safer. Grace left the industry she was in and moved entirely into freelance work to avoid further discrimination and scrutiny. Sharif used class politics to compensate for his parents' disgust at his gender identity, lying to his parents about his partner's success and beauty. As he started to dress in more expensive clothing, he found that his mother was more accepting. Cris also muted her gender presentation and dressed "girly" so that she would not be kicked out of establishments such as clubs or restaurants.

For some LBTQ people, family acceptance also came hand in hand with conforming to gendered roles within the family. Trans woman Divya dressed as a boy at family gatherings and helped her mother with household chores, which made her mother happy in the short term but resulted in psychological distress for herself in the long term. Others, like Kalinda, were able to reduce the frequency of homophobic abuse from their parents by contributing to household expenses. She said that whenever her mother needed money at the end of each month, the beatings would cease for a few days but would resume when her mother's allowance was finished. Similarly, Shahina said that it was easier to control her father's sexual abuse when she was much younger by conforming to wearing boy's clothes.

Staying in the closet meant establishing a successful career as a gay man for Valerie, a trans woman. She said she was able to gain the respect of her colleagues, which resulted in her accessing promotions and raises quickly, accumulating financial and social capital in her career in finance over 15 years. This also made her transition process much less disruptive as she was able to afford surgery and trips to Bangkok. However, she said that she faced violent mood swings and was manic-depressive in private, which affected her psychological well-being for many years as well as her ability to keep friends and trust people. For Valerie, online resources supporting transitioning helped her to gain the necessary resources for her preparation to come out.

Staying in the closet took a toll on LBTQ people like Alison, who turned to taking drugs, smoking and alcohol. She later checked herself into the Institute of Mental Health, kept thinking of killing herself, and engaged regularly in self-mutilation. While seeing a doctor at the Institute of Mental Health, she attempted to jump from the eighth floor of a shopping centre. Because she was seen as a 'big brother' figure, she felt that she could not confide in LBTQ friends who were younger and respected her as an older butch. While she found solace at church when she was younger, being part of the mainstream church community also meant that she had to stay closeted. Finally going online in the late 1990s, she found a lesbian community in Internet Relay Chat groups, where she felt less alone. She shared that later on, she could not find work in the industry that she was qualified in because of her masculine gender presentation. If companies offered her work, they often underpaid her or asked her to work part-time. To pay her bills, she worked multiple shifts in sleazy bars. She said she had to "femme up" after she graduated in order to get a full-time job.

6. Low rates of reporting and seeking assistance

As with most incidents of violence and discrimination, reporting rates for violence against LBTQ persons are low because of high levels of stigma associated with reporting; the culture of shame, victim blaming, and self-blame for violence survivors; a lack of awareness of resources; the fear of retraumatisation through the reporting process; or a belief that the reporting process would not be helpful because of discriminatory laws and policies. In cases where LBTQ people sought assistance, they have been turned away by insensitive institutions or retraumatised by the lack of resources.

> **"At that point in time, I wasn't 21 yet, and under the Muslim law, you have to be 21 to move out of your house without your parents' consent. At that point, I was only 18. So they say no matter how I do a police report to say that I went out, out of my own will, [moving out was] still not [legal] if my mum were to make a police report."**
>
> *– Fadilah, whose mother said her girlfriend kidnapped her*

In Siti's case, she wanted to report the intimate partner abuse she faced, but she did not know of any resources that would be LBTQ sensitive. Gina, a bisexual woman who was outed by peers through a viral video at 17 years of age, chose not to report this to the police because she was not aware that she could. Gina noted her acceptance of her social isolation, "You kind of just accept that your existence has to be kept away from the mainstream population, because if it's otherwise, you'll have to deal with a lot more shit than you do already." Likewise, trans woman Serene shared that she thinks "attitudes will change when trans people are more visible and it is no longer so esoteric".

Stigma affects LBTQ people in reporting, especially for masculine-identified LBTQ persons like Sharif, Alison, and Aisha, who considered it weakness, emasculating, or degrading to their gender identities and personhoods to seek assistance for instances of homophobic violence and discrimination. Alison could not speak to anyone about her trouble because she feared her younger friends would no longer look up to her as a "big brother".

In cases where LBTQ people did attempt to report, they faced added harassment and fear. When reporting her family's abuse for the purpose of a personal protection order application, Kalinda overheard derogatory comments made by police officers that her partner was a "*pondan*". For Sheila, it was retraumatising to be asked if she was "a real woman" before a police officer took her report. With trans women like Sheila and Shahina, who frequently faced violence as sex workers, sexual and physical violence was normalised and insignificant when compared to what they went through when they were younger. Likewise, Elaine, a young lesbian in her 20s, chose to downplay the school bullying she faced because she had already been subjected to worse from her mother. Regarding the bullies, she said, "Actually, I don't really count it as picked on. Because, like you know, I was treated very rough when I was younger, so this kind of thing, it's really nothing to me. Just that I'll think, 'Okay, I don't need to fight back with you.' Because with this kind of attitude, next time you're just going to have a hard time." This normalisation of discrimination and violence not only means that LBTQ people are tolerating abuse and violence over long periods of time, but it can also lead to them not framing these violations as crimes, despite the long-term, damaging physical and psychological effects that impact them for years afterwards.

Sheila reported the physical and sexual abuse she suffered from her parents to her school counsellor and was placed in a boys' home at 14 by social workers from the Ministry of Social and Family Development. Part of the protocol for rehoming minors who have faced familial abuse, the homes also act as a shelter for juvenile offenders, some of whom were involved in gang violence and sex crimes as minors. Sheila shared that she was constantly bullied for her "effeminate nature", and was subject to "blanket parties" where "the boys suddenly come and cover you with the blanket and all beat you up. You don't know who to blame." When she reported it to the staff at the boys' home, they blamed her, saying that she "made a mistake" when she was first caught kissing her boyfriend. The

boys also tried to sexually abuse her, pulling her hair and forcing her to perform oral sex on them. She said that as a result, she was always caught and punished by the staff for "fighting and being very rebellious". Instead of recognising the retraumatisation, the staff characterised her as "having a temper, having attitude problem". She finally left the home at 15 with her mother.

In cases where homophobic sexual violence is reported by LBTQ people, protection may not be extended to them. Divya, a trans woman, was in a club when her drink was spiked and she was taken to a hotel room and raped. The front office told her later that four or five men were involved. She did not report the incident to the police, as her friend who had also been drugged and raped was told by the police that "it was her own fault". Our interviewees reported that the police made insensitive and discriminatory comments based on their SOGIESC, which further discouraged and retraumatised the few LBTQ victims who had chosen to report.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

LBTQ people displayed varied coping strategies consisting of finding support from social networks and workplaces, moving out, seeking support from health providers, going back into the closet, and – more rarely – reporting and seeking assistance. Friends and social networks were often a comfort and served as an immediate source of assistance, especially with housing, given the absence of LGBTQ shelters in Singapore. Employers and workplaces rarely provided support but such help could be life-changing. Instead, some LBTQ individuals took matters into their own hands and moved out of their family homes or even out of the country. However, moving out may mean loss of access to family resources. Another common coping strategy was to remain in the closet and refrain from speaking out at home and at work, which could negatively impact psychological health. A few said that one coping strategy was to report violence and discrimination to public and private institutions, including the police and employers. This was affected by high levels of stigma associated with reporting, the culture of shame and self-blame for violence survivors, lack of awareness of resources, fear of retraumatisation during the reporting process, or the belief that reporting would not help because of discriminatory laws and policies. It is imperative that institutions and resources are LGBTQ sensitive in order to encourage people to overcome these circumstances and seek protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Cease censorship of positive LGBTQ portrayals in local and international media, as consistent and systematic erasure has long-lasting effects on the well-being of LBTQ persons.
- In the training of healthcare professionals, police officers, social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists, include sensitivity training and LGBTQ-specific guidelines that pay specific attention to violence and discrimination affecting LBTQ women.
- Support the creation and dissemination of subsidised mental health and well-being resources that LBTQ people can tap on, such as affirming counselling centres and Singapore-specific websites with information on coping with sexual orientation and gender identity, transition, health, and where to seek help.

Chapter 13

FUTURE OUTLOOK

INTRODUCTION

LBTQ individuals imagine a future where they are able to live with their partner in a stable home environment. They see family life as important, although this often does not include individuals from their family of birth, as many of the individuals we interviewed were estranged from their biological family. For these individuals, a positive outlook for the future was one in which they could live with their partner in a flat they owned together, with children (adopted or otherwise) and/or a pet. However, most did not believe that they would be able to achieve this future in Singapore.

"A threat like this, even if sometimes it has no teeth, is enough to cause a tremendous amount of emotional and psychological distress. And the fact that the law is silent about protecting the LGBT community, the fact that the law still discriminates with things such as 377A, even though that applies only to men, it allows a social climate in which people treat LGBT persons as if they are a disease, as if they are criminals that they can report to the police. In that respect, that threat is specific to sexuality."

– Dee, on the negative impact of Section 377A

KEY FINDINGS

In this chapter, we discuss three findings in terms of: (1) what the state must do in order for this need to become a reality, and (2) what LBTQ individuals think they can do as individuals.

1. Forming and recognising LBTQ families

LBTQ individuals want to be able to settle down and form their own families with a stable partner. In addition, they also want these families to be legally recognised. Legal recognition would give them protection and a sense of security about their future. As discussed in this report, LBTQ individuals face many challenges in Singapore as a result of violence and discrimination. In addition to this, they also worry about the everyday aspects of life such as being able to earn a sustainable living, being able to provide for their family and having a sense that their future is one that is happy, secure, and positive in terms of health, financial security, and overall well-being. For some, recognition of same-sex partnerships is key to feeling a sense of belonging in Singapore and that they are part of society, just like any other Singaporean who might want to marry and start a family in this country.

Joyce, for example, said that she saw a future with her partner. She was concerned about everyday things like any straight person in a stable relationship. She was worried about paying her taxes and dreamt of starting a business.

Andrea wanted same-sex marriage to be legalised in Singapore. She said that without this legalisation, same-sex couples in de facto relationships will not feel like they are "part of the social fabric". Andrea argued that state public housing policy discriminates against non-heteronormative family formations. This made it difficult for her to have her own place and settle down with her partner. Andrea had not come out to her parents but planned to do so. However, she saw moving out as the first step before coming out. Andrea said, "Yah, always wanted to move out as soon as possible, because I never enjoyed staying in that house last time, when I was a kid. It felt very suffocating."

Legal recognition for LBTQ families or the legalisation of same-sex partnerships is thus important to many individuals because they understand that government public housing policies favour married couples. For those individuals in long-term de facto relationships, it is important that same-sex partnerships are legalised in the future so that these couples are able to experience stable family life. Belinda, for example, argued that it is critical to have structures in place that ensure legal recognition. Without this, "many people will brush it [LBTQ matters/families] under the carpet and pretend it doesn't exist". LBTQ individuals understand that without legal recognition, people like Adibah cannot hope to get medical benefits for their partner through their firm's medical insurance or tax exemptions, in addition to other benefits a heterosexual couple would be able to access. Adibah would not automatically be considered next of kin or be able to obtain power of attorney over her partner without contestation. Legal recognition would also mean that LBTQ individuals like Cris's girlfriend would feel more able to tell people that they have a partner and are in a serious relationship. Cris's partner was afraid to tell anyone for fear of being disowned by her parents. Grace said her relationships "cannot develop further". She explained, "You can't stay together, you can't start something together as a couple. It feels like I have nothing to offer in a relationship."

Trans women worry about a future with no partner and no family. For trans women, loneliness is a significant concern, as they may not be able to turn to their biological family from whom they may be estranged. Also, it might be difficult for them to settle down if their SOGIESC is considered non-conforming by society. For trans women like Sheila, the future is one where she "can be a housewife, married to a nice man". Sheila said she wanted a normal life, one where she can "stay home and cook". Without stability in her family life, Sheila believed she would face a future where she had to "spend all my life on the streets and always scared". She felt the government must step in to "help each and every transgender who needs a house" and said the lack of a stable family life and a place to stay is why trans women are "too stressed" and "end up in prison". They have "no money to eat, they go and steal. I've seen [this happen to] a lot of friends." She shared how she felt the future was bleak for her. "I'm getting old, and I'm working now, just starting my CPF [contributions]. I'm just starting, you know. Everything is too late for me. I'm staying in a room. What if I cannot walk or anything? All these fears I have. But I always wanted to have a normal life."

Family formation plays an essential part in LBTQ individuals' sense of a positive and secure future in Singapore. Most LBTQ individuals want a 'normal life' in Singapore. For them, this is linked to family life, whether it is acceptance by their biological family or the ability to form their own families of choice. Legal recognition for these families is critical in order that LBTQ individuals can access the same rights to family formation as heterosexual couples in Singapore.

2. Repeal Section 377A and systematically eliminate all forms of discrimination

Many of our interviewees believe that the first step to a secure future is the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code. Section 377A is the anti-sodomy law that criminalises sex between men, consenting or otherwise. Under the law, men who have sex with men or attempt to procure sex with men can be fined or imprisoned for up to two years.[1] Even though LBTQ women are not directly targeted by this law, without its repeal, they are collectively affected along with the entire community. LBTQ individuals like Connie believe that Singapore will remain conservative and closed-minded as long as Section 377A is in place.

1 Penal Code Section 377A, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ProvIds=pr377A-.

While the government has argued that it is up to society to decide when it is ready for the repeal, and Singapore's leaders have mentioned time and again that Singapore is not ready for the repeal,[2] the inaction on this matter has meant that many LBTQ individuals continue to face discrimination and violence at the hands of family members, their employers, teachers, and the general public. The presence of Section 377A legitimises their treatment as second-class citizens unworthy of the rights accorded to fellow citizens who are heterosexual. For example, Connie argued that through the lack of housing subsidies for singles and the policy that bars singles under the age of 35 from purchasing subsidised public housing flats, LBTQ individuals are systematically discriminated against and treated as "substandard citizens" for not reproducing within the socio-legal structure of heterosexual marriage.

According to Yvonne and Dee, the government must enact laws that protect all citizens and not be swayed by 'majority' moral arguments. It must adopt a rights-based framework in order that change can be effected and LBTQ individuals can truly begin to feel protected and be a part of Singapore. For Yvonne, no positive change for the LBTQ community is possible until "the government changes its mind". While the private sector (typically multinational corporations) has taken steps to recognise the presence of LBTQ individuals in Singapore (e.g. through supporting Pink Dot and enacting internal human resource policies), this has not been the case with the public sector. For instance, Valerie said, "I didn't see much initiative or much advancement… especially from the government's side. I know it's not about just making the policy that will change the concept or will change the situation, because I know a big factor is also the people's perception. It's about the society, the culture. But in the Singapore context, whether you like it or not, most of the things happening here are still driven by the government." What LBTQ individuals want to see in the future is a government that takes the stand and leads the way so that there are, as Jamie says, "institutional changes that make a lot of difference". According to Jamie, "currently we live in a society where institutions don't have the ability to just stand up for what is right".

Again, there is a strong sense from within the LBTQ community that a positive future is one that is rooted in a rights-based framework, in which the Singapore government leads by example. With Section 377A still in place, many LBTQ individuals remain pessimistic about the future because it essentially works against the adoption of such a rights-based framework, not only by the government but also by state and non-state institutions and actors. By criminalising homosexuality, Section 377A stands in the way of LBTQ individuals obtaining legal recognition and the implementation of anti-discrimination laws on the grounds of sexuality, among others. For example, Anita said that the TAFEP guidelines on workplace discrimination are not a law, and hence are not legally binding. They also do not specifically mention sexuality-based workplace discrimination.

As the earlier chapters of this report have shown, a lack of openness to difference and understanding of diversity has meant that LBTQ individuals continue to experience discriminatory treatment by healthcare service providers, in school, and at the workplace. They are also less likely to be able to access counselling and therapy services that cater to their needs. For Jaya, this resulted in a "constant struggle" for "access to a decent and dignified life".

The elimination of all forms of discrimination against LBTQ individuals can only take place with the repeal of Section 377A as a first step. Criminalisation of homosexuality means that LBTQ individuals will always be seen as deviant and substandard in comparison to heterosexual citizens, in addition to the cascading effects of institutionalised discrimination. As long as this persists, the future for LBTQ individuals will remain bleak.

3. Plans to migrate

Several of the respondents we spoke to said that emigrating from Singapore was one way they would be able to improve the outlook for their future. The government's decision not to repeal and the subsequent

2 "PM Lee discusses gay rights and succession planning on BBC's HARDTalk", *Channel NewsAsia*, March 1, 2017, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/pm-lee-discusses-gay-rights-and-succession-planning-on-bbc-s-har-8751864.

failure of the constitutional challenges to Section 377A in 2013 and 2014 resulted in many feeling more pessimistic about whether LBTQ family formation would ever be recognised or whether discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC would ever be prohibited. Without recognition of their right to form families and communities, and without anti-discrimination legislation in place, LBTQ individuals do not see a future in Singapore. As discussed earlier, many find it difficult to access affordable housing before 35 years of age, when they can officially purchase a HDB flat as a single person. This is particularly crucial in instances where young adult LBTQ individuals are in stable relationships similar to heterosexual couples in the 20s and looking to settle down with their de facto partner. It is also crucial for LBTQ individuals to be able to access affordable housing in instances where they live with the threat of violence at home because of their non-normative sexuality.

For example, Nadia said that she did not see a future in Singapore because of the lack of access to affordable housing. She was unable to purchase a flat unless she was married or at least 35 years of age and hence was unable to start independent family life even though she lived with the threat of physical and psychological violence at home. Nadia was living in Australia during the time of the interview. She said, "Where would I go for housing for de facto couples? I've done some research and there's really little to no information on it, and it leads you to the very confusing HDB website, because if you buy a house and you don't materialise this marriage certificate, it's taken back, and that doesn't leave us anywhere, does it? Apart from renting, it's what has [influenced] my decision to leave, because the laws here are not conducive to living here peacefully."

Similarly, Chandra, Aisha, and Sarah all mentioned that they were looking for opportunities to move overseas. In Aisha's case, the plan was to move overseas for further studies and not return after that. Aisha wanted to live somewhere where she could be legally married and adopt children. Similarly, Nic said she wanted her own place, a dog, and her own family, and was looking for suitable places to move to and realise that dream. Chandra saw herself living with her partner outside of Singapore. She said she and her partner were prepared to sever ties with both sets of parents if they did not accept their relationship.

Among our interviewees, there was a general lack of confidence that the government would make changes to legislation to protect the rights of LBTQ individuals in the near future. They also felt that the social context in Singapore was unlikely to change for the better in the near future. Like Sarah, the overall feedback from those interviewed was a lack of "faith in the future of Singapore, especially since the incident with the National Library Board 'penguin' saga and Lawrence Khong and the Wear White movement" (see Chapter 2, Background and Context). These incidents had a negative impact on Sarah and others like her, as they showed how the lives of queer people in Singapore are demonised and made invisible because these lives are seen as unsuitable for social discourse, as seen in the case of children's books being moved from the children's section to the adult section of public libraries.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

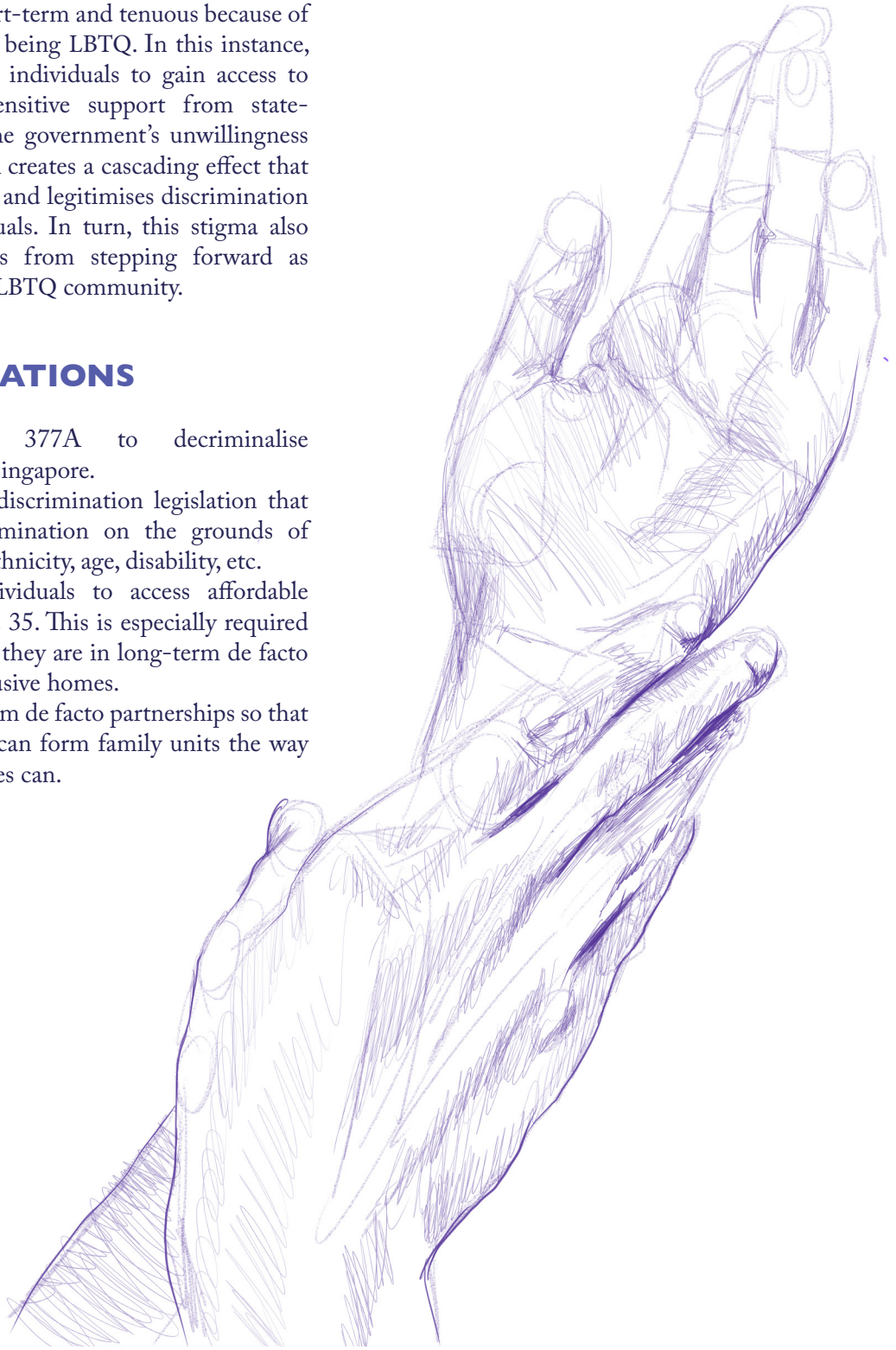
LBTQ individuals dream of a future in Singapore where they are able to form their own families. They want to feel secure knowing that their rights are being protected by legislation put in place by the state. They strongly believe that the government must lead the way in order for such changes in legislation and social attitudes to take place. Lack of confidence in the government's commitment to making these changes happen and the belief that the social context in Singapore would not allow for the recognition of the rights of LBTQ individuals and their families of choice has resulted in LBTQ people making plans to migrate from Singapore. This has a direct impact on Singapore's declining talent pool, given the country's low fertility rates. Recognising same-sex families and their right to adopt is one way to keep and nurture Singaporean talent.

For those who are unable to leave Singapore and also estranged from their biological family, the future remains pessimistic. A lack of connectedness to family and community means that these LBTQ individuals are less likely to feel anchored and rooted to Singapore. However, at the same time, they are unable to leave to find families and communities of choice elsewhere. Without the support of both their biological families and the state, these LBTQ individuals believe that

their right to physical, mental, and financial security will be severely compromised as they age in place in Singapore. As a result, they need to look for alternative support mechanisms (e.g. the LGBTQ community and friends). However, this is challenging, as these support networks are often short-term and tenuous because of the stigma attached to being LBTQ. In this instance, it is crucial for LBTQ individuals to gain access to reliable and LBTQ-sensitive support from state-funded institutions. The government's unwillingness to repeal Section 377A creates a cascading effect that promotes homophobia and legitimises discrimination against LBTQ individuals. In turn, this stigma also discourages individuals from stepping forward as allies or friends of the LBTQ community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Repeal Section 377A to decriminalise homosexuality in Singapore.
- Put in place anti-discrimination legislation that criminalises discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, etc.
- Assist LBTQ individuals to access affordable housing before age 35. This is especially required in instances where they are in long-term de facto partnerships or abusive homes.
- Recognise long-term de facto partnerships so that LBTQ individuals can form family units the way heterosexual couples can.



Chapter 14

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this report show how LBTQ individuals experience violence and discrimination as a result of their SOGIESC. The report has documented how these experiences take place not just in public spaces like the street but also online, in schools, in the workplace, in healthcare institutions, and at home. We have also suggested how the violence and discrimination has had a negative impact on the physical safety and the economic, emotional, and psychological well-being of LBTQ individuals. LBTQ individuals are unlikely to seek help and many find it difficult to cope as they are unable to remove themselves from these sites of violence or discrimination without endangering their personal safety or negatively impacting their current or future economic security. Being LBTQ in Singapore impacts an individual's access to employment, education, healthcare, and other public services. In this final chapter of the report, we provide a summary of the key findings and policy recommendations. We also revisit the usefulness of Singapore's pragmatic approach to human rights and how this illiberal form of pragmatism[1,2] is one that makes LBTQ citizens particularly vulnerable because of the presence of Section 377A that continues to legitimise the unequal treatment of LBTQ individuals in both the private and public sphere. Finally, we make a case for why this status quo cannot continue and offer some further steps to improve inclusion of LBTQ individuals.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings from our study show that gender- and sexuality-based violence and discrimination have a significant impact on many aspects of LBTQ lives in Singapore. We have shown how these involve family life, sexual and intimate relations, social and psychological well-being, and access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, and public spaces without being harassed.

A sense of duty to the family, a desire to keep the peace at home, and fear of discrimination and violence prevent some LBTQ people from coming out. The need to keep their identities hidden from their parents makes the home a very stressful place. LBTQ individuals who decide not to come out must live a double life and keep their sexuality hidden. Family life at home becomes estranged over the longer term for these individuals, as they are forced to hide their identity from their parents and siblings. Our study also shows that individuals who came out or had their sexuality revealed experienced physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Corrective and punitive sexual violence was experienced at the hands of family members and intimate partners. These incidents may take place multiple times over the course of their lives. LBTQ victim-survivors are unlikely to report these incidents as the perpetrators of the violence are often known to them, and they may believe that the violence they experienced was part and parcel of being LBTQ.

Hence, the LBTQ individual's life becomes fraught with physical danger and emotional stress. They are unable to access public spaces without fear of violence or discrimination. Those who present as gender non-conforming or as having non-normative sexualities are more likely to experience violence and discrimination in public spaces. The societal stigma associated with being LBTQ has consequences for psychological well-being. Retreating into themselves

1 Beng-Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

2 Audrey Yue, "Creative Queer Singapore: The Illiberal Pragmatics of Cultural Production", *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (2007): 149-160.

in private and public life can have a strong impact on the LBTQ individual's mental health. They experience psychological distress associated with coming out, or the denial of their identity when they are unable to do so. Limited access to coping resources may further impact their psychological well-being, as many have no choice but to keep their sexuality hidden or risk the consequences. Our study has also shown how adult LBTQ persons live in fear of losing their jobs or homes if found out by homophobic employers or landlords. Younger people are more vulnerable as they are more likely to be unemployed and do not have the means to live independently of their parents.

The challenges of being LBTQ in Singapore are further compounded by the difficulties in accessing housing and finding adequate and secure employment. LBTQ individuals not in heterosexual marriages are unable to access subsidised public housing until they are 35 years old, when they can purchase subsidised public housing as a single person with housing grants. Even if individuals in stable same-sex relationships would like to form a family nucleus with their partner like heterosexual married Singaporeans, they cannot do so and therefore must wait until they are 35 to purchase subsidised public housing. Same-sex couples often spend a significant portion of their monthly income on rent, resulting in less monthly savings to set aside to pay the deposit for a flat. Even as renters, LBTQ people are forced to move from place to place as they are unable to cope with the high rental cost, unsecure contracts, and homophobic landlords who may decide not to renew their contract or evict them. LBTQ individuals' lives are thus rather precarious as they are unable to access affordable housing and, in some instances, are forced to live with violence and discrimination at home because they are unable to move out.

With reference to employment, LBTQ individuals faced discrimination regardless of whether they were employed in the private or public sector. LBTQ people were less likely to get hired if they did not conform to gender stereotypes or did not pass as heterosexual. They were threatened with job loss, experienced bullying, or advised not to come out of the closet about their SOGIESC. In some instances, restrictions were imposed over clothing and behaviour. LBTQ individuals reported mental stress from being unable to disclose their sexuality without the risk of losing their jobs. Transgender sex workers experienced violence and harassment in their work, yet they were unable to make police reports. Other transgender persons who were not sex workers were also sexually harassed. These discriminatory practices were never documented in company records.

Experiences with service providers in health and education differed between women in same-sex relationships and transgender individuals. Women in same-sex relationships encountered financial and legal inequities when accessing healthcare services, as their relationships are not legally recognised in Singapore. Transgender individuals had to bear the high cost of HRT medication and the cost of transitioning. As there is no subsidy for these drugs and medical services, individuals would often resort to unregulated online sources of HRT, which could lead to potential health risks. Moreover, healthcare workers lacked knowledge of how best to treat LBTQ patients and gave incorrect medical advice to those with same-sex partners and transgender persons.

LBTQ people have sought help and support from friends and from LBTQ social networks. While some employers are supportive, these are rare and hard to find. Help given by informal networks and friends is more likely to collapse when those offering support are also dependants who do not have resources of their own. LBTQ individuals keep their non-normative identities hidden as a way to cope, as they are less likely to lose their home, their jobs, and the support of social networks if they remain in the closet. Once they come out or are found out, they may lose this support. As a means of coping, they are also less likely to report incidents of violence and/or discrimination for fear of further stigma associated with reporting. They blame themselves for the violence and discrimination they experience and believe that reporting will not help them or change the situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

LBTQ individuals have the right to live free from all forms of violence and discrimination. The state must lead the way in ensuring that the security and rights

of LBTQ individuals are protected. It can do this by making law and policy changes that recognise and are sensitive to LBTQ individuals' needs.

The state can provide sensitivity training for healthcare professionals, social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists that does not problematise the relationship as the root of the issue and pays specific attention to the dynamics of LBTQ women in violent intimate relationships. The state can also appoint an LBTQ advocate in key sectors of state service provision (e.g. health, education, housing, the police). The advocate should be someone who is sensitive to the needs and particular experiences of LBTQ individuals when they report incidents of domestic violence or discrimination from state-run institutions (e.g. the police, family services). In instances where LBTQ individuals have experienced violence and discrimination, lack of access to necessary services can further impair their psychological distress, mental health, and self-esteem. Policy changes that mandate sensitivity training may result in LBTQ individuals being more likely to seek help, knowing that the state service provider is able to assist them without judging them based on their SOGIESC.

Policy changes that recognise LBTQ individuals can help to promote equal access to housing, healthcare, and education. At present, policies in these sectors of government result in discrimination against LBTQ individuals. For example, in housing, they must wait until they are 35 years old to buy as single Singaporeans. Government policy, especially in the education sector, tends to view non-normative sexual orientation and gender expression as deviant, such as in the school system, where LBTQ individuals are often bullied but educators feel unable to assist without clear guidelines from the MOE. Lack of intervention from staff and other authority figures has serious sexual, psychological, and economic consequences for LBTQ children in the long term. The right to education is denied to children who are forced out of school by bullying and violence due to their sexual orientation or gender non-conformity. Our educators' responses suggest that the issue is a systemic one that resides at the MOE policy level.

Changes to education, housing, and healthcare policies are necessary to mandate equal treatment of LBTQ individuals. This should be supported by the provision of training for educators and staff in government institutions. On the broader level, information on sexual diversity and gender should be integrated into school curricula and state-supported sexuality education, while awareness-raising campaigns can be launched to educate the general population on SOGIESC issues and sexual diversity. Current media regulations that censor neutral and positive portrayals of women in same-sex relationships perpetuate negative stereotypes and homophobia among the general public. As recommended by the CEDAW Committee in 2017, media codes must be changed to equalise treatment of heterosexual and homosexual content. [3]

In the longer term, plans should be in place to amend Section 12(1) of the Women's Charter to permit and recognise registration of same-sex partnerships in Singapore and elsewhere. This should eventually include access to residency for same-sex partners. By implementing changes to law and policy that are more sensitive to the needs of LBTQ individuals, the state can ensure that the rights, safety, and security of LBTQ individuals are protected in Singapore. These changes will also send a clear signal that these individuals must be treated as equal members of Singapore society and that they cannot be discriminated against because of their SOGIESC. These changes will also enable LBTQ individuals to participate fully as members of society and thus enjoy all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

FROM ILLIBERAL PRAGMATISM TO THE RIGHT TO BE CARED FOR

This report shows how LBTQ citizens in Singapore are doubly marginalised for their gender and also their SOGIESC. Through in-depth interviews with LBTQ individuals in Singapore, we have demonstrated how their rights to life, security of the person, work,

3 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of Singapore", https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/SGP/CO/5&Lang=En.

education, adequate housing, social security, and other protection measures, as well as the right to live free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, have been curtailed. Support from the state through legislation and policy would send a positive message to the LBTQ community and would also allow the state to fulfil its responsibilities as a signatory to international conventions such as CEDAW, CRC, and the UPR. For example, repealing Section 377A of the Penal Code and changing censorship guidelines would send a clear signal to Singaporean society that being LBTQ is not immoral and that all citizens have the right to live free from violence and discrimination regardless of their sexuality. The state must also put in place policies that are LBTQ sensitive and measures that allow both government-based and non-governmental groups to work freely and openly to address the needs of LBTQ individuals and the community.

However, the Singapore government maintains a pragmatic approach to rights, one that is very much in line with what Audrey Yue calls the "illegal pragmatics" of the Singapore state. In her paper, Yue argues that "illegal pragmatics, rather than post-Stonewall rights-based discourse of liberation, is the foundation for the emergence of queer Singapore".[4] Yue draws from Chua Beng Huat's extensive writing on the ideology of pragmatism[5] to make the point that "central to pragmatism is thus the logic of illiberalism where interventions and implementations are potentially always neo-liberal and non-liberal, rational and irrational".[6] It is these contradictions that have resulted in Singapore being viewed as more cosmopolitan, liberalised (e.g. gay bars and saunas, LGBTQ content in theatre and the arts, Pink Dot, the presence of LGBTQ groups), and attractive to foreign investors and foreign talent, even as homosexuality continues to be punishable by the law, and positive and progressive queer Internet and media content continue to be censored by the state. The state is able, in this instance, to project the image of a more progressive Singapore while at the same time turning a blind eye to the rights, safety, and protections that ought to be afforded to LGBTQ citizens.

This report has shown how LBTQ people in Singapore continue to experience violence and discrimination in their daily lives both at home and in public. Many of those interviewed have experienced violence and discrimination by a family member or loved one. They were unable to or unsure of how to seek help, and even when they sought help, this was usually through informal networks rather than state-run services. Furthermore, seeking help and care through informal networks of friends could not always be sustained, because their friends were not in a position to help them in the long term or faced getting into trouble with employers or other authority figures for providing help. In cases where LBTQ individuals approached the government sector for help (e.g. schools, clinics), they also experienced discrimination or were unable to receive help that was sensitive to their needs. LBTQ individuals, therefore, find it difficult to care for themselves and to exercise their right to be cared for by the state. Moreover, the Singapore government's strategies for providing social welfare networks to its citizens rely heavily on family and community networks of support, deploying a Confucian ethic of care to 'outsource' its care responsibilities. However, these are the very networks of familial or kin-based care that LBTQ individuals are unable to access because, in many cases, the violence and discrimination they experience are at the hands of those closest to them.

LBTQ individuals must be able to live free from fear of violence and discrimination in both their public and private lives. It is only when this right is guaranteed that they can begin to realise their dream of a future in which they can make their own "families of choice".[7,8] These are non-kinship-based personal communities generating "hidden solidarities" that act as a "vital safety net providing much needed support and intimacy".[9] Such social relationships can work

4 Yue, "Creative Queer Singapore".

5 Chua, Communitarian Ideology.

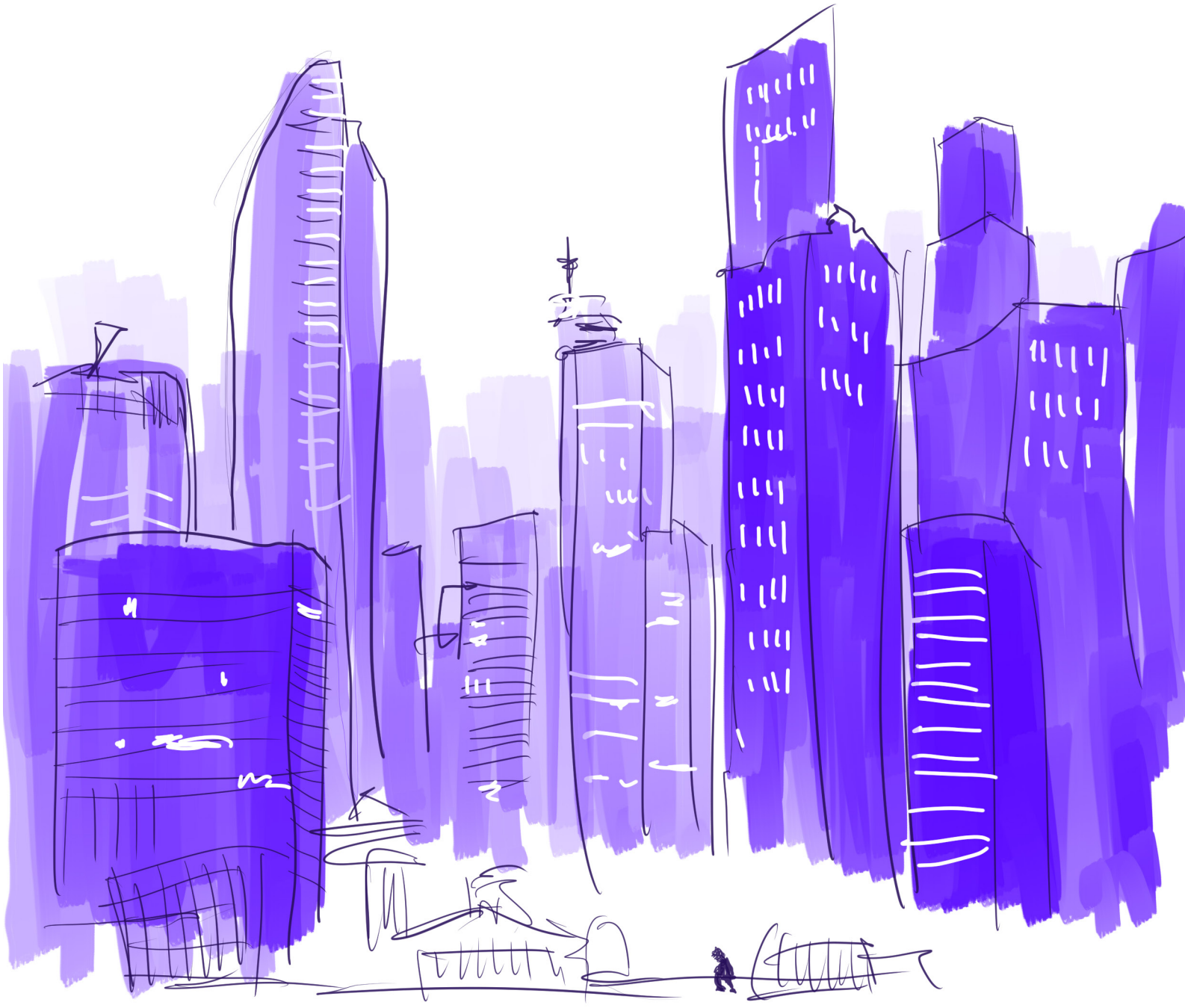
6 Yue, "Creative Queer Singapore".

7 Ken Plummer, "The Square of Intimate Citizenship: Some Preliminary Proposals", *Citizenship Studies* 5, no. 3 (2001): 237-253.

8 Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001).

9 Liz Spencer and Raymond Edward Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006): 210.

in tandem with the state and are not a replacement for state-run and state-supported services. They are communities chosen by individuals who feel secure knowing that their rights are protected by legislation and policy, put in place by a state that is concerned about the welfare and well-being of its citizens. These social relationships and communities play a crucial role in truly making Singapore a home for all its people.



HELPFUL RESOURCES

If you are currently struggling to cope with or heal from discrimination, violence, or other SOGIESC-related issues, please consider reaching out to the following resources for help:

- The Brave Helpline is a social service helpline that is affirming, empathetic, resourceful, and attentive to the anxieties and hopes of LBTQI women in Singapore. Please visit **bravespace.org** or call +65 8788 8817 (Mondays to Fridays 3:00PM to 9:30PM, excluding public holidays) to get in touch with well-trained women professionals and volunteers offering confidential information and support to women who identify as LBTQI.

- AWARE is Singapore's leading gender equality advocacy group. Its support services provide information and support for women who are in distress or at a time of uncertainty in their lives. Resources include Helpline, Befrienders (for victims of gender-based violence), counselling, legal advice, and Sexual Assault Care Centre. Please visit **www.aware.org.sg** or call its helpline at 1800 777 555 (Mondays to Fridays 3:00PM to 9:30PM) for further information on resources suitable for you.

- Oogachaga is a community-based, non-profit, professional organisation working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals, couples, and families in Singapore. Please visit **www.oogachaga.com**, call its hotline at +65 6226 6629 on Wednesdays (7:00PM to 10:00PM) or contact CARE@oogachaga.com for email counselling.

- The T Project runs the only shelter for homeless transgender women in Singapore. It also runs the Alicia Community Centre, which offers various services for the transgender community, including counselling and other resources. Please visit **www.thetprojectsg.org** for more information.

- Counselling and Care Centre is an LBTQ-friendly non-governmental, non-profit agency offering counselling services. Please visit **www.counsel.org.sg** for more information on the counselling services offered and to book an appointment.

For more links to LGBTQ resources and community groups, please visit **www.sayoni.com**.

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