



Submission No. 36

(Youth Violence)

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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via email: fchy.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Please find below a submission by the Coalition of Activist Lesbians (COAL) to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth *Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians*. We thank the Standing Committee for the opportunity to make this submission, as the effects of discrimination and violence against young lesbian Australians are a matter of great concern to COAL.

About COAL

The Coalition of Activist Lesbians (COAL) was formed in 1994 to work towards ending discrimination against lesbians. COAL is a national community organisation that advocates on behalf of Australian lesbians to all levels of government. We are the only United Nations-accredited lesbian Non-Government Organisation (NGO). In this role, COAL lobbied at the UN 4th World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, and co-hosted the first international lesbian-space tent at the 1995 NGO Forum. COAL networks widely with national and international women's, and lesbian and gay, organisations.

We, among a number of other organizations, successfully lobbied for the Australian Government to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

COAL produces research papers about lesbian health; violence against lesbians; lesbophobia; and lesbian domestic violence. We have convened the Lesbian Health Advisory Group (LHAG) in NSW to promote best practice lesbian health care. We produce training manuals on cultural

competence for service providers, in order to improve lesbians' access to these services. In addition, we produce trainer training manuals for those running groups for new and emerging lesbians.

As Australia's peak body on lesbian-specific human rights COAL is in a unique position to offer the lesbian perspective on the impact of violence on young Australians.

Introduction: The Intersectionality of Violence Against Young Australian Lesbians

A lesbian is a woman who displays one or more of the three aspects of lesbian identity, namely attraction, behaviour, and identity (Solarz, 1999). Lesbians are both women and non-heterosexual women. Like heterosexual women, they are sometimes subject to sexism, but unlike most heterosexual women, they are also sometimes subject to 'heterosexism'.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines sexism as 'The assumption that one sex is superior to the other and the resultant discrimination practised against members of the supposed inferior sex, especially by men against women; also conformity with the traditional stereotyping of social roles on the basis of sex (Online, 1989). Heterosexism may be defined as 'the complex social and psychological processes underpinning violence and discrimination against...lesbians...a social system that privileges heterosexuality at the expense of non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities (Fish, 2006; Herek, 1990; Leonard, 2005). Heterosexism assumes that sex, gender and the relationship between the two are fixed at birth... According to this heterosexist presumption, society is built on the primal division and attraction between male and female. Those who challenge this presumption are subject to differing degrees of discrimination and abuse. (Heterosexism is a) coordinated system for punishing those who in different ways pose a threat to heterosexist privilege and authority' (Leonard et al, 2008:4). Heterosexism also implies 'that alternative sexualities pose a threat to society' (Clause 2.1 of the AMA's position statement, 2002, Online). Thus, lesbians are stigmatised in at least two different ways, and more if they happen to belong to other minority groups. For instance, 'Middle-Eastern background participants said that homophobic abuse from family or community could take such forms as exclusion, verbal abuse, assault, stalking, threats of violence and even death threats. "Honour killings" as a possible response would be the most extreme expression of a family's feelings of shame about a daughter who did not conform to family and community expectations' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:5).

Some groundbreaking exploratory research by Szymanski (2005, 2006, 2008) looked at the interlocking effects of sexism and heterosexism in lesbians. As far as we are aware, it is the only study of its kind on lesbians. Meyer (1995) did conduct research on heterosexism and internalised heterosexism in gay men, but not in lesbians, who he surmised would have some similar, but some different issues from gay men. Szymanski concluded that 'internalized sexism may not operate in the same way for lesbians as it does for heterosexual women' (2005:359). Her research showed that 'heterosexism, sexism, and internalized heterosexism are uniquely related to psychological distress in lesbians. Furthermore, the results suggest that the interaction of heterosexist and sexist events accounts for variance in psychological distress above and beyond

main effects. This suggests that the experience of multiple forms of oppression can have a profound effect on mental health' (Szymanski, 2005:359). If this were so, one might expect some lesbians' mental health not to be as good as that of some gay men. In addition, a certain percentage of the excess psychological morbidity experienced by some lesbians over some heterosexual women (Cochran and Mays et al, 2001) may result from lesbians being uncertain 'when a particular act of prejudice or discrimination is based on their sexual orientation, their gender, or both' (2005:359) and having to defend themselves against both.

Homophobia is defined as 'The fear and hatred of gay and lesbian people and of their sexual desires and practices' (Leonard, 2002:9). O'Hanlan et al argue that 'the practice of homophobia – the socialization of heterosexuals against homosexuals and concomitant conditioning of...lesbians ...against themselves – must be recognized by healthcare providers as a legitimate and potent health hazard' (2004, Online). For the purposes of this submission, the word 'lesbophobia' will be substituted for the more widely used 'homophobia'. To the extent that a lesbian takes these derogatory societal values into herself, she will experience 'internalised lesbophobia' (Balsam and Szymanski, 2005; Szymanski, 2008, 2005; Szymanski and Chung, 2003). This internalized stigma may prevent her from, amongst other things, accessing healthcare or reporting heterosexist violence (Leonard et al, 2008; McNair, 2003, 2000; McNair, Anderson et al, 2003; McNair and Dyson, 1999).

Thus, the experience of violence towards young Australian lesbians may sometimes be similar, but sometimes different from, violence towards young heterosexual women, and also young gay men who are not subject to sexism. It can often be difficult to separate out differential information regarding young people, and specifically young lesbians, because, although surveys *do* collect information on sex and age (amongst other demographic data), this is mostly not *reported* separately. For instance, this situation largely applied in *Not Yet Equal* (the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby's survey on discrimination against LGBTI people, 2005) and in *Coming Forward* (Leonard et al's Dec, 2008 survey concerning the under-reporting of heterosexist violence and same-sex partner abuse in Victoria). With diligence, it has been possible to glean several instances of the differential experience of younger LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people. However, this information, itself, whilst offering tantalising hints that gay and lesbian experiences are different, has not usually been sex-disaggregated. Unless data is both sex-disaggregated and age-disaggregated, it is impossible to provide 'evidence' concerning, for example, the impact of violence on (only) young Australians, or (only) young lesbian Australians.

We will now address the specific Terms of Reference of this Inquiry.

1. Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians

According to Leonard et al, 'GLBT people perceive public space as inherently unsafe' (2008:22). In 2005 77.9% of Victorian lesbians and gays felt unsafe to hold their partner's hand in public (McNair and Thomacos, 2005:56). In one NSW study, 'over half took the view that gay men and lesbians were generally safer if they hid their sexual orientation' (Attorney-General's

Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:7), or 'just lock your door' as one respondent to the Leonard et al survey had been advised to do by a policeperson to whom they were reporting heterosexist violence (2008:1). This is not without good reason, since, in a more recent survey, 'Nearly 85 per cent of GLBT respondents have been subject to heterosexist violence or harassment in their lifetimes' (Leonard et al, 2008:4). This is consistent with the overall findings of an earlier survey in NSW, in which 'Eighty-five per cent had at some time experienced (homophobic) abuse, harassment or violence...A total of 69% of survey respondents felt vulnerable to violence or harassment from strangers (74% in inner Sydney, 63% outside Sydney). Additionally, 19% felt vulnerable to violence or harassment from people they knew' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:2). According to the NSW Attorney-General, 'The social problem of hate related violence towards gay men and lesbians has been formally recognised by Governments in New South Wales for some 20 years' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:ii). It is not a new one. In a NSW survey conducted in 1995 'gay men and lesbians were between four and six times more likely to be assaulted in a 12 month period than other Sydney men and women' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:ii).

The experience of violence is ubiquitous: 'Heterosexist violence can occur anywhere and at any time. Respondents reported significant levels of violence across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria. Much of the violence is random and committed by strangers. However, GLBT people are also subject to relatively high levels of heterosexist violence at home and at work' (Leonard et al, 2008:4). Discrimination has also been experienced in service provision, (although it is not known what percentage of the following figure represented actual physical violence) in that 24.9% of Victorian lesbians have experienced active discrimination in medical settings because of their same-sex relationships (McNair and Thomacos, 2005:51). These figures were not age-disaggregated, so it is not possible to say what percentage of these participants were 'young lesbians' - although they did account for exactly 25% of total research participants (McNair and Thomacos, 2005:24). While it does not equate to physical violence, the fact that 13% (and more in rural areas) of lesbians had had their medical confidentiality breached in the past 5 years, by members of a respected and supposedly ethical profession, would be likely to contribute to lesbians' perceptions of lack of safety and respect in the broader community. In this particular survey, 81.5% of Victorian lesbians (n=355) had felt publicly insulted; 70.7% had been verbally abused; 15.4% had received explicit threats; 9.9% had been physically assaulted; and 1.5% had been sexually assaulted (McNair and Thomacos, 2005:49). Sergeant Scott Davis of the Victoria Police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Reference Group stated that, of hate crimes against lesbians reported to the police between 2001 and 2006, 21% were committed against lesbians younger than 20 years and a combined figure of 42% against lesbians younger than 30, with 6% of these resulting in arrests (Davis, personal communication, February, 2008).

There is, by necessity, a "'trade-off'" between openness and safety facing many lesbians and gay men... decisions that are often taken for granted by other members of the community' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:ii). Of young people, aged 14-24 years in Leonard et al's survey, 60% reported hiding their sexual orientation from their families, 70% from educational institutions, and 80% in public (2008:4,22). When examined in conjunction with figures for lesbophobia in schools (Hillier et al, 2005, 1998), combined with

religious educational institutions' ongoing legally-sanctioned ability to discriminate against their staff and students on the basis of sexual orientation - condoned by the Victorian Attorney-General (Fyfe, 27 Sept, 2009) - this failure to disclose their sexual orientation might, in fact, be considered a functional survival mechanism for avoiding heterosexist bullying and violence.

In the absence of omnipresent police protection, it is necessary for young lesbians to protect themselves from violence. A NSW survey found that, 'Levels of safety were said to vary substantially from one place or situation to another, and gay men and lesbians needed to assess risk case by case' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:6). The same survey found that, 'There was a common observation across a number of the groups that the people who were most vulnerable to homophobic abuse and violence were younger gay men and lesbians who conformed to a stereotype ("butch dykes", "baby dykes"...)' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:6). Safety of particular suburbs can also change over time, for instance, there is anecdotal evidence of a recent increase in lesbian-bashings outside venues in Brunswick (Conway, personal communication, 12-10-'09). Similarly, perceptions of the safety of Sydney's main lesbian and gay precinct has changed over time, 'Oxford Street was no longer generally seen as a comfortable and safe place for lesbians and gay men. This area and its venues, said one woman, had become "a spectator sport for straights"' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:6).

Parallelling violence in heterosexual relationships, 42% of lesbians in Leonard et al's study reported having been in an abusive same-sex relationship, and, overall in LGBT relationships, 78% of 'the abuse was psychological and 58 per cent involved physical abuse or being hit' (2008:4). No figures were available, specifically, for young lesbians. It was found that not all service providers are culturally competent, nor set up to deal with same-sex family violence (Leonard et al, 2008).

2. Links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians

For young lesbians, substance use is often a defence mechanism that is used in order to deal with the effects of heterosexist violence, rather than its cause. Historically, lesbians have been shown to drink more alcohol than their heterosexual peers (Murnane, Smith et al, 2000; Skinner and Otis, 1996). Moreover, the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health reveals that, in a comparative analysis of the younger cohort 'non-heterosexual women were significantly more likely to report risky alcohol use (7% compared to 3.9%), marijuana use (58.2% compared to 21.5%), use of other illicit drugs (40.7% compared to 10.2%) and injecting drug use (10.8% compared to 1.2%)' (Hillier et al. 2004). The same women were significantly more likely to report being depressed (38% vs. 19%), higher levels of anxiety (17.1% vs. 7.9%) and having tried to harm or kill themselves in the last six months (12.6 vs. 2.7%) (McNair et al, 2004). Hillier et al's research (2005) showed that 14% of young lesbians had injected drugs once a week or more, compared to 1-2% of young people in general. The severity of the heterosexist abuse

they had experienced was also found to be positively correlated with the severity of their alcohol and drug use (Hillier et al, 2005). Bostwick et al. (2005) found that, after adjusting for potentially confounding demographic variables, past-year depression significantly predicted past-year alcohol dependence among lesbians (OR = 2.03, $p < .01$). The literature suggests that substance use may be a coping strategy to deal with the stress related to living in homophobic environments (quoted in Corboz, Dowsett et al, 2008:13).

See also Appendix I.

3. The relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Australians

In *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, a book which is highly commended to this Inquiry, Steve Biddulph states that, ‘Sexuality, when fully allowed to unfold, has many aspects. IT merges the sacred, the intimate, the sensual, the emotional, the creative, the funny, the tender and the intense...But also the inner harms – loss of trust, loss of the capacity for love, destruction of self-worth, death of spirit. We know, intuitively, and sometimes from bitter experience of our own, that if you hurt someone’s sexuality you hurt their soul. When the soul begins to die, the body follows’ (Biddulph, 2009:164). Bullying and violence has this effect on the wellbeing of young lesbian Australians. A linkage has been shown to exist between heterosexist violence, substance usage, and mental health disorders. For instance, ‘The Australian Bureau of Statistics *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing* (2007) reports on the 12 month prevalence rates of anxiety disorders, affective disorders and substance use disorders, by sexual orientation. According to this data, people who report being homosexual...have higher levels of anxiety disorders (31.5 per cent vs. 14.1 per cent), affective disorders (19.2 per cent vs. 6 per cent) and substance use disorders 8.6 per cent vs. 5.0 per cent’ (Corboz, Dowsett et al, 2008:5)

It is not necessarily only those young people who have experienced heterosexist violence who fear it. Sometimes the impact of violence on young lesbians spreads throughout the community. In line with Scheff’s hypothesis on ‘attunement’ (2003), ‘Physical violence based on homophobia was a concern for far more people than had actually experienced it’ (Attorney-General’s Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:6). Of interest is that, in Leonard et al’s survey, around 14% of GLBT respondents claimed to be ‘living in fear of heterosexist violence’, but ‘Approximately 45 per cent of GLBT respondents *occasionally* hide their sexual orientation or gender identity at community events or while accessing services’ (Leonard et al, 2008: iv,v)

There has been a growing body of evidence concerning the ‘minority stress’ experienced by lesbian and gay people (Balsam and Szymanski, 2005; Meyer, 2003, 1995; Brooks, 1981). Meyer has define ‘minority stress’ as ‘the excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position’ (Meyer, 2003:675). One study showed that ‘There are numerous decisions and choices (large and small)

that they make, and numerous ways in which they modify their behaviour, in an effort to reduce the likelihood of abuse' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:6). It is little wonder that the need for such constant vigilance is stressful. Hillier et al's survey revealed that 60.7% of female research participants (n=1,929) experienced depression or anxiety (2006:34). This figure was not age-disaggregated, but 39% of all survey participants were younger than 30 years (2006:17). Corboz, Dowsett et al's large international review of literature published between 2000 and 2008 showed that 'same-sex attracted young people, particularly women, are the group most susceptible to depression and suicide (2008:3).

Sometimes, as in YL's case (See Appendix I), the impact of being subjected to heterosexist violence can turn outwards, for instance, in violence towards others. Sometimes she, and others like her, turn the violence inwards onto themselves. For instance, 'Half of the survey respondents reported that experience or concerns relating to abuse made them feel worried, stressed or anxious. Other impacts of homophobic abuse included depression, hiding or feeling bad about one's sexuality, negative effects on friendships and relationships, and being discouraged from going out or socialising. In terms of age, most of these adverse impacts were most frequently reported by the youngest respondents (16-19 years)' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:7). Corboz, Dowsett et al have shown that this is a widespread phenomenon throughout the world: 'The literature on depressive symptoms in young people robustly shows that gay/lesbian...young people exhibit significantly more depressive symptoms than heterosexual and other-sex attracted young people. This was consistently found across studies that sampled participants from the USA, Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and Australia' (2008:5).

Sometimes these feelings were self-medicated, as suggested in section 2 of this submission, through use of substances. For those who have a biomedical, rather than a socio-cultural, perspective on health, it might be easy to blame young lesbians for their 'lifestyle' choices. Corboz, Dowsett et al point out, 'different life experiences that contribute to at least two areas of particular need in relation to mental health and depression: managing the effects of homophobia and its consequences on a daily basis through the life course; and gaining access to mental health services that are able to respond to their needs in socially and culturally competent ways' (2008:4).

As shown in *Coming Forward* (Leonard et al, 2008), sometimes internalised lesbophobia, or previous negative experience, precluded young lesbians even from reporting heterosexist violence to police. If they do not know how to obtain support for themselves if young lesbians encounter heterosexist violence, they are more likely to feel unsafe and vulnerable. Of interest is the fact that 18% of 14 to 24 year olds reported not knowing where to go (Leonard et al, 2008:38) as a barrier to reporting heterosexist violence. This figure was not sex-disaggregated, so it is not possible to know whether the knowledge of young lesbians differed from that of young gay men. Other reasons cited for not reporting heterosexist violence - not only in the school environment - included: not believing they would receive fair treatment, believing they would be subjected to further discrimination by service providers and perpetrators, fear of 'being outed' i.e. having their sexual orientation disclosed by other people to other people (Leonard et al, 2008). For 14% of people the decision not to report heterosexist violence was based on past negative experience (Leonard et al, 2008). YL's story, in Appendix I provides an example of the

negative experiences of one young lesbian at school and university. YL's story is not unique, and the fact that she has disclosed - outside the interview - that she has, in the past, used substances to deal with the effects of the violence she has experienced is by no means unusual. Over a decade later, she is still coming to terms with the effects of that violence.

In a parallel NSW study, 'Among those experiencing abuse or violence in the past year, 13% had reported the most recent incident to the Police, 7% had consulted a counsellor/psychologist/social worker about it, and smaller numbers had sought help from various other agencies. Respondents were much more likely to have sought such assistance if they suffered physical injury – and also if they knew the perpetrator(s). The percentage of respondents who had not sought any assistance from such agencies was particularly high among the youngest respondents (ages 16-19) (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:3). This last finding is particularly disturbing.

According to Corboz, Dowsett et al, 'a longitudinal study conducted in New Zealand (Fergusson et al. 2005) showed that rates of major depression over a four-year period increased significantly according to increasing non-heterosexual identity...41.6 per cent of predominantly homosexual women met criteria for major depression, compared with...24.9 per cent of exclusively heterosexual women. Moreover, all the studies reviewed that measured lifetime prevalence of major depression showed significantly higher rates for lesbian and other homosexually active women when compared with heterosexual women. There is also evidence to suggest that rates of depression among lesbian and other homosexually active women vary according to age. In particular, younger and older lesbians appear to be at a higher risk of depression than mid-age lesbians (2008:5). The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (2008) *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, was consistent with Corboz, Dowsett et al's 2008 survey, showing that homosexual respondents had higher levels of affective disorders (which include bipolar disorder, major depression and dysthymia) than heterosexual respondents (19.2 per cent vs. 6 per cent). Corboz, Dowsett et al were perplexed because, 'Curiously, there were no social intervention studies that targeted social processes such as victimisation, homophobia, and discrimination: the probable root of poor mental health in non-heterosexual people' (2008:12).

In the *Private Lives* study (Pitts et al. 2006), GLB people living in rural/remote areas were more likely than those in metropolitan areas to report feeling depressed on more than half the days in the past two years (39.2 per cent vs. 31.8 per cent, $\chi^2(1) = 13.95$, $p < .001$) and were more likely to contemplate self-harm or feel they were 'better off dead' (21.0 per cent vs. 14.2 per cent, $\chi^2(1) = 20.52$, $p < .001$). This data was not sex- or age-disaggregated to show the experiences of young lesbians, although there is no reason to assume that they would be more positive than other rural lesbians' and gays'.

McNair et al. (2005) found that in a cohort of 22 to 27-year-old Australian women, rates of feeling that life in the last week had not been worth living elevated according to ascending non-heterosexual identity. Further, mainly heterosexual (11.1 per cent),... and exclusively/mainly homosexual (17.3 per cent) women were significantly more likely to report either harming or attempting to kill themselves in the last six months compared with exclusively heterosexual women (2.7 per cent). McNair et al. found that in a mid-aged cohort (50 to 55 years)... attempted

suicide in the last six months... 0.8 per cent of exclusively heterosexual women, 4per cent of mainly heterosexual women, and 2 per cent of exclusively/mainly homosexual women). Few studies explored the relationship between depression and suicide; however, the results of (this study) show a strong link between these two variables (Corboz, Dosest et al, 2008:14).

Suicide Prevention Australia (August, 2009, Online) states that there has been a developing body of evidence concerning suicide and gays and lesbians for at least the past 25 years. However, some national bodies, such as beyondblue in Victoria, have been slow to incorporate these findings into their programs. For instance, Barbeler, in 1992, surveyed 200 Sydney lesbians, aged 14-25 years. Results reported in that study indicated that '63% had contemplated suicide whilst 30% had had suicide attempts; 60% reported feeling depressed about their sexuality with 80% of respondents admitting to regular alcohol abuse' (reported in Millard, 1996:123). The recent Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA) *Position Statement: Suicide and self harm among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities* (2009), has found that studies conducted over the last decade or so reveal that GLB individuals attempt suicide at rates between 3.5 and 14 times those of their heterosexual peers (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997; Garofalo et al., 1998; Herrell et al., 1999; National Institute for Mental Health in England, 2007; Nicholas & Howard, 2002; Remafedi et al., 1998, 1994). Quinn (2003) suggested that lesbians and gays living in rural areas are six times more likely to attempt suicide that the population as a whole.

Experiences of heterosexism and homophobia are known to contribute to social isolation, poorer mental health outcomes, substances use, and other socio-cultural and economic problems and conditions, which in turn place non-heterosexual individuals at greater risk of suicide and self-harm (Dyson et al., 2003; Hillier & Walsh, 1999; Russell, 2003). For instance, 'Numerous studies have illustrated a direct association between discrimination and many of the key risk factors for suicide and self-harm (particularly mental illness)' (Department of Health and Ageing, 2007b). Similarly, heterosexist social attitudes have been associated with social isolation, family rejection, violence (and the ongoing threat of violence), social invisibility, selfdenial, guilt, internalised homophobia ...and lack of access to culturally competent care (Bagley and Tremblay, 1997; Hillier et al., 2005; Leonard, 2002; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). More specifically, in one study, 28 per cent of lesbians versus 8.3 per cent of heterosexual women reported deliberate self-harm (Nicholas and Howard, 1998). Ironically, lesbians, who may be in need of extra social support, because of endemic heterosexist discrimination and violence, may be less likely to be afforded the protection of factors known to provide resilience, such as strong family connections, peer support and access to culturally competent mental health providers (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). Dyson et al have demonstrated that it is indisputably clear that younger GLBT people are at an elevated risk of suicide and self-harm...than their heterosexual peers (2003). It is only recently that research commissioned by beyondblue has found that, in a six-month period, young lesbian women were over eight times as likely as straight women to have tried to harm or kill themselves (Corboz, Dowsett et al, 2008).

Corboz, Dowsett et al concluded that, 'The theme that runs throughout this review is the effects (sic) of homophobia and heterosexism on the mental health of non-heterosexual people. In many

ways, this points to a burden of poor mental health that may well be entirely preventable' (2008:14).

4. Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

A number of studies have found institutional discrimination, be it sexism or heterosexism, to be more difficult to address, and eradicate, than the discriminatory behaviour of individuals (Bowers, Plummer et al, 2006; Daley, 2003). Of Australians aged over 14, 35% who were surveyed in 2005 believed that homosexuality was 'immoral', and a greater proportion of rural people held that view (Flood and Hamilton, 2005). If sexism and heterosexism are endemic, and fully embedded in our legal, medical, and educational institutions, as suggested elsewhere in this submission, society-wide action will be required to combat them.

5. Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

a) Human Rights Legislation

There needs to be comprehensive legislation prohibiting discrimination against non-heterosexual people at all levels of government, State and Territory and Commonwealth. Anti-discrimination legislation will only be effective if it operates in the context of a national human rights charter. It would be preferable for this to be embedded in the Constitution, so that successive governments cannot, at their whim, remove lesbians' and gays' human rights, as happened in 2004 when the Howard government, in direct contravention of Articles 1 and 7 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Article 26 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* passed the *Marriage Amendment Act 2004*. This Act amended the *Marriage Act 1961* subsection 5(1), to include the words 'marriage means the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004, Online) and subsection 88EA specifically to stipulate that 'A union solemnised in a foreign country between: (a) a man and another man; or (b) a woman and another woman; must not be recognised as a marriage in Australia' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004, Online). This is necessary in order to fulfil Australia's legal obligations under international law and to ensure, for example, that lesbian and gay taxpayers are not funding institutions that discriminate against themselves, for instance by ensuring that public funding is only accessible to agencies that offer services equally to all Australians, irrespective of sexual orientation, or any other personal characteristics that are irrelevant to the provision of goods and services. As suggested by the *Skool's Out* survey in NSW 'Living in an environment free of discrimination is one of the principles of the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*' (2002:4).

b) Fine Tuning Community-Wide Anti-Lesbophobic and Anti-Homophobia Campaigns

The majority of Government funded programs addressing homophobic violence have mostly targeted, or represented, the gay and lesbian community in its broader sense. Leonard et al's research (2008) suggests that more specific targeting of programs – to different sub-groups within the lesbian and gay communities - may be required. Similarly, 'Schools were highlighted by all focus groups as critical areas of concern – because they appear to be key sites of homophobic abuse and violence and because they provide some of the best opportunities for information and education to young people about diverse sexualities, stereotyping, discrimination and homophobia' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:9). Much research found schools to be 'the site of a great deal of homophobic behaviour, but it also reflected the fact that for many young gays and lesbians the school was the place where they had the best chance of getting clear and accurate information... This applied to primary as well as secondary schools' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:4,6).

Both Leonard et al, (2008) and the NSW Attorney-General's research (2003) showed that strategies, such as the introduction of Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers (GLLOs), are somewhat ameliorating the effects of heterosexual violence against young gays and lesbians *if and when they report it*, although Leonard et al (2008) suggest that there is still room for improvement in this regard. Funding of GLLOs throughout Australia needs to be improved. Studies suggest that, 'Ongoing information and education might be considered to support these successes by ensuring that lesbians and gay men are aware of their legislative rights and encouraged to access legal, justice, health and related services' (Attorney-General's Department of NSW and Urbis, Keys, Young, 2003:9). However, prior to this happening, all service providers need to be fully educated in how to offer culturally competent service to their lesbian and gay clients.

c) Further research

Lesbians and gay communities' youngest and oldest community members are the most vulnerable to suicide (Dyson et al, 2003; Quinn, 2003). Suicide Prevention Australia's chair Michael Dudley said, 'We know those statistics currently have shown the suicide rate is falling, but we know from work on this with coroners and day-to-day stakeholders and the ABS and others, that the statistics are, conservatively, at least 30-40 percent underreported, and we don't know how many of those people would be same-sex attracted or have gender identity issues as a basis for their distress' (Lamont, 2009, Online). Therefore, further research, which fully disaggregates rates of attempted and completed suicide among non-heterosexual populations, e.g. by sex, sexual orientation, age, geographic location, disability and ethnicity is required, in order for specifically-targeted prevention strategies to be effective, and before the causal mechanisms underpinning suicide and self-harming within non-heterosexual communities can be understood and ameliorated.

Conclusion

This submission has demonstrated that:

- heterosexist violence against young Australian lesbians and gays is widespread and endemic
- much of it is hidden, due to under-reporting
- some service providers, including educational institutions, offer little support or understanding to young Australian lesbians
- there is a need for further education and training, in all levels of government and among existing youth service providers and also victim support services, concerning the legislative and human rights of Australian lesbians.

COAL would welcome the opportunity to provide the Standing Committee with further information on the impact of violence on young lesbian Australians and also to form a partnership with governments, and other service providers, to develop strategies to combat and reduce heterosexist violence against this vulnerable population.

Yours sincerely

Barbary Clarke on behalf of

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Appendix I

Interview With a Young Lesbian (YL) - Speaking on School Experiences.

I would say I went to a Catholic...Catholic schools right the way through, but, I'd say, the violence didn't stop...I went to...(it) was about Year Nine and people suspected I was gay. I didn't know I was gay, at that stage, or a lesbian and...So I was called a um...'bricky's labourer'...that was one of the things... and 'dyke' and...

Look, I had a lesbian teacher, at that stage, and once everyone found out she was gay, she was kicked out of school and ...Also, because in class she mentioned that a good form of contraception was to be gay, 'cause you wouldn't get pregnant and... Yeah, so they didn't like that in a public school so...I think of, what with the commotion around that sort of targeted...People targeted me even more so... and I think it got to the stage it was generally just taunts in school and... I got 'outed' when I was in Year Twelve and the whole school knew I was gay 'cause it went right the way through and um...and...and that was like, in classes people would make comments, throw stuff at me. The teachers wouldn't do anything. I had one teacher actually join in. So that was disgusting. It was disgusting that...being gay. I had another teacher, though, that was my psychology teacher and he brought in stuff to say that some people were gay, biologically, and there's differences in the brain and that sort of changed a couple of people's perceptions.

But I had my head slammed into locker doors...like that side (sic) of things. I had my school bus...people yelling out comments non-stop, just generally: 'It's disgusting!', 'You fucking lesbian!', 'Fucking dyke!' And..yeah, generally it'd be in big groups. 'Cause I was known for beating up school bullies at my school, so no one would take me on one-on-one. So...it was all big groups, and physically, at stages...so...that didn't last long 'cause I beat them up, but they still tried it and, yeah, and it got like...I'd say as well, my sister, little sister went to the same school and she started the year after I finished and she was picked on all the way through her school because it went right through the school. Yeah. So everyone thought she was gay because I was gay and everyone would tell her that it was disgusting that her sister was gay, and all stuff like that. So she was bullied right the way through her schooling, of course, 'cause it went on. (I) got outed, everyone found out, so all the people in other years knew. So, when she started there, she copped it as well. And none of the teachers, apart from the psychology one, actually actively took steps to stop it.

The Vice-Principal was gay but he, he could not tell anyone. And I remember, like, he pulled me into his office after I finished and told me that he wished he could have done more, but he would have lost his job. And that his partner died while he was teaching there and he wasn't able to tell anyone. So he's promised to look after my sister when she went there, but that was about the only positive steps that any of the staff took. I was sent to a school counsellor to try and work out why I was gay and to stop me being gay. And my parents were called to tell them that I was gay and...yeah, so...

(YL was asked if her parents knew already). No, my mum didn't, my dad did...so...but that was because they wanted me... (the school wanted) permission to send me to a psychiatrist, to work out what was wrong with me because I was gay. That there must have been some sort of disorder. Ten years ago, I graduated in 1998 so...ten years ago...So I was sent to a school psychiatrist, psychiatrist near the school, to try and work through why I was. And (I) was told that, because I was abused as a kid, that made me gay.

So...And then I was banned from the school, afterwards. I was supposed to be looking after my sister and...('cause my parents fought heaps), I was supposed to be taking an active role looking after her. And they wouldn't let me in the school, except to see her. My partner was in Year Eleven, below me, and I wasn't allowed to come visit her. And then they made an exception, that I was allowed to come, but I had to be escorted by a teacher in case I made any of the other students gay. So I'm **contagious, too!** So...that was just...yeah so I was just, sort of, like copped it from the students. The teachers were (MISSING WORD) supportive and then there was the...Whether it was an official policy, or anything, that I had to report to Admin, and get escorted to go see my little sister. And my girlfriend said she could always tell when I was in the school grounds, because everyone would say, 'The trenchcoat lesbian's here!' So...I used to wear an overcoat, and that was just what I was known as and um...Yeah, but it was...yeah, pretty horrific, and I can understand why there was a lot of gay suicides at my school. Like, there was one every year. I knew the guy a year level above me, he went to a party and gave a guy a blow job and then someone found out, and the guy said that he raped him and...um..yeah, pressed charges because someone found out that yeah, he had oral sex with a guy. And, rather than admit that he did it voluntarily, he said that he was raped. And the guy um...had to do a police report and that night...ah...killed himself. So...and then I'd heard, from another guy, that...And the Vice-Principal, that was gay, told me about the suicide, other suicides as well. So... you know, it was just the attitude in the school that...It was so much hatred and um...Oh, well, that's what the Vice-Principal said. Um, I don't about throughout the school but I just knew, personally, the guy the year level above me. And um...yeah so that was (MISSING WORD) related. It came out, what had happened, and not only was he known as gay, but everyone thought he'd raped someone which, like, I knew him before, and there was no way in hell that would have happened. And um...yeah so, that one I knew, when the Vice-Principal had just told me about it and um... the, the lesbian teacher, who I had in Year Nine, later did the research, and did some research on gay experiences in Catholic schools and lesbians and she told me about it, as well, at the school. She did her PhD on it, so I'd say that it'd be...um...Was it the Catholic uni? Yeah (spelt woman's name to interviewer). So...That would have been done on there, 'cause I was one of the people, and there was couple of guys from my year level as well. Oh...that was on the homophobia. Yeah. So...both from other students and from staff.

She tried to be as supportive as she could, and she said that she'd picked...that she thought I was a lesbian and was trying to do counselling and stuff, with me, around that, without actually saying I was. But she said that's what she was trying to do later. But she tried to come in, and be supportive, and let it...She used to do massage with people who had AIDS, and one of the students reacted poorly to that, as well, so they wouldn't let her touch 'em, stuff like that, 'cause she'd obviously have AIDS, too. So...but I think, yeah, like, because it wasn't in the curriculum.

There was nothing that was supportive that...um...just sort of created an environment where there was so much fear and hatred and um...Like, people thought that if they were around me, or anything like that, other girls were thinking that I was attracted to them. I had to have my own room, on the school camp, 'cause I wasn't allowed in the guys' room, 'cause it's a Catholic school, and I wasn't allowed in the girls' room in case I did anything to the girls. So... there was...I did have...from one camp, I had to be in a room on my own, and the other camp I had to be in a room with the teachers, um...No other student was treated like that, so it was just solely based on the fact that everyone knew that I was a lesbian...um...so like, there, things like that.

So...Not so much around any of the lesbian stuff, but I had other problems in my life, and I had teachers that were supportive for that but, um...all the...Even, like, the teachers that had supported me through all the other stuff going on, um... they were the ones that wanted to me to go see a psychiatrist, to deal with my issues, because my life experiences had 'made me gay'.

Oh, I was put on medication, which I later had (been) told that there was no need for me to be put on medication. And, um...told that, yeah, part of my post-traumatic stress was that I was a lesbian and that I had phobia of men, and all this kind of stuff, um...which was completely unfounded but um...yeah. And, like, I tried explaining to the psychiatrist that, um...Like my dad, I told him that I was gay. He said he'd remembered when I was in Grade One, he said, before any of the abuse started, that there was the kiss-chasey teams and, um, I'd been on a kiss-chasey team with the guys so I could kiss the girls. And he'd been called in to my school to address the inappropriate behavior at that stage. So...that had started before any abuse, or anything like that, yet my psychiatrist **still** thought it was because I was abused, rather than looking at anything like that. And even the psychologist I went and saw recently, um...yeah, at 28 years of age, and he still said that.. um...being gay can be a symptom of a psychological disorder and um...and wanted to work on that. This would have been about three weeks ago. He said probably about one in ten gay and lesbians are born gay and lesbian.

Like, I just told him that I'm not prepared to talk about it and I said, as far as I'm concerned, I'm a lesbian, I'm happy being a lesbian, and I don't think that, see that, as a problem in need of fixing...And he sort of took a very big back step and said okay, that he was happy to do that. But I have had people that I've...had to see lots of counsellors in my life that...who've also taken that stance. They thought it was a symptom of bipolar disorder and, um...evidently a border-line personality can have... yeah...traits of being gay. (MISSING WORDS) I don't know how but, I don't believe they do. So, but I've had other counsellors.... So yeah, but um...Yeah, I've had questions from different professionals along the lines, sort of asking me, um...more my views towards guys to see whether, um...I find any guys sexually attractive um...if I have hatred towards guys in general and, um...like a lot of those questions, to see if there is something wrong with me and my sexuality. So...I'd probably call it more, um... homophobia... from professionals and, um...I think it's more part of the medical model that anything different has to be something wrong, something deviant and um...yeah...it's classified as a sickness so...yeah...I think that's more where that comes from.

I'd like say it got better at uni, but it didn't. I went to uni in (name of country town in Victoria). So...and um...I thought (it) would be a lot better. I know a lot friends that were bashed on campus, um...yeah, lesbians, lesbians that were bashed on campus. I knew, actually, more lesbians than gay males that were bashed. Um... And walking around the streets, 'cause (suburb of country town) is a bit of a gay area, gay and lesbian area. It was close to where there was a gay club, that closed, and, um...like I'd been walking down the street with my mum and had people yell out, 'Fucking lesbian!', rah, rah, rah and, like, my mum doesn't swear. I was horrified it would happen in front of my mum and, um...my favourite was getting yelled at, 'Fucking poof!', at which point I flashed my tits and say, 'I'm a lesbian! Get it right - tits, girl!' So...yeah...So I had my own ways of dealing with it. But um...yeah, but I sort of, I found it everywhere and I've been reluctant, where I live now, to hold hands even though I can hold hands with my partner. Um...I know two gay guys living on my street, and they're too afraid to

do it, as well. It's more... it's a country town sort of feel, even though... Like, (name of country town)... There's a lot of older gay and lesbians around there now. It's a sort of a centre of health and healing, but I'd still be very reluctant. Probably 'cause I grew up there, as well, so... but yeah, it's just... I sort of find it everywhere so... working in pubs, I worked in a country pub in (outer urban area) and had one um... guy that was doing performances and stuff, telling gay jokes. So... yeah, I ended up jumping up on the bar and telling (CAN'T DECIPHER SOME WORDS) worse, and said, 'Look! If you gonna try that, get some better jokes and, um... put him in his box and he went very, very quiet and, like, yeah, I sort of learnt from ways to deal with it... and... Going out in public, like, I used to go to bars with partners and get guys wanting to join in and get very, very in my face, um... like they would literally try and kiss me while I was kissing my partner, and stuff like that. So I don't like going to any situations like that now. So I think yeah... it's about... everywhere you go there's something, somewhere.

I think the funny thing is, now, people think that it doesn't happen. I think that, yeah... Just because, I think, being gay and lesbian is more accepted, it doesn't mean that it is completely accepted. So... like, I find um... I got onto counselling with youth. There was a lot more acceptance there and... Except, they still turned around and said, like, jokingly to each other, 'That's **so gay!**' And I'm looking at them and I'm, like, no, sorry, what, and like I'd pick them up on it but... in terms of... Look, I thought, people, they might have an issue with my sexuality because I was open with it, and I did spend a lot of time with girls. And my brother would come up and give me a hug... And I'm very conscious of that kind of stuff. More so, I think, than straight people. Um... just 'cause, I think, it's the experiences I had growing up, where people thought that I was instantly attracted to them 'cause I was gay... And all lesbians are some sort of 'sex machines', attracted to everyone that don't have any taste. Yeah, so I find I'm more self-conscious about that, even in my practice. Anyhow and yeah... physical contact (MISSING WORDS) stuff like that... But yeah... generally, younger people have been better than older people... So probably that was just generations growing up and what other people have experienced. I was talking to one of my mates, on stuff like that. He said, 'It's okay', and 'People call each other dykes and poofs' and... Although, if you are gay, that's, that really hurts to hear it so... yeah... The edited version.