

**ALLYSHIP IN ACTION:
BUILDING BYSTANDER ACTION
FOR TRANS AND GENDER EQUITY
FORUM OUTCOMES PAPER**



Zoe Belle
Gender Collective

**BUILDING A
RESPECTFUL
COMMUNITY**



**WOMEN'S HEALTH
IN THE NORTH**
voice • choice • power



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Women's Health In the North acknowledges Victorian Aboriginal people as the Traditional Owners of the land on which we provide our services – the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin nation – and pay our respect to their Elders past, present and future. WHIN acknowledges that Aboriginal sovereignty was never given up and that we stand on stolen land. We are committed to Aboriginal self-determination and to supporting Treaty and truth-telling processes.

We recognise the ongoing leadership role of the Aboriginal community on gender equality and the health, safety and wellbeing of women and gender-diverse people. As First Peoples, Aboriginal Victorians are best placed to determine a culturally appropriate path to these in their communities.

Women's Health In the North acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.



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OVERVIEW

Zoe Belle Gender Collective (ZBGC) and Women's Health In the North (WHIN) partnered in the delivery of a learning Forum in April 2024 called *Allyship in Action: Building bystander action for trans and gender equity*.

The purpose of the event was to support participants to implement good practice approaches to the prevention of violence against trans and gender diverse (TGD) people, with a focus on bystander action. The audience was prevention of violence against women and gender equity workers from across the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne (NMR) as well as the leads in the prevention of violence against women from other Victorian Women's Health Services.

The format of the day was informed by an integration of the different expertise drawn across the two delivery partners. The agenda featured presentations and activities centred around the tools and knowledge necessary to effectively challenge transphobia and transmisogyny in our professional and personal lives.

Given the current climate of anti-trans sentiment in the community and the confronting nature of some of the content, safety on the day was paramount. ZBGC advised on appropriate safety planning to safeguard the well-being of all speakers, guests and participants before, during and after the event.

The Forum started with presentations from ZBGC, Transcend Australia, Safe and Equal and WHIN. Topics covered included defining transmisogyny and transphobia and exploring their impacts, the social context of backlash towards young trans people and their families, principles and practice for taking bystander action against all forms of discrimination, and working as an ally in partnerships.

Attendees then heard from a panel of four trans women and trans feminine people about their experiences of transphobia and transmisogyny across a variety of settings. They shared examples of when people have been supportive but also when opportunities have been missed to be allies and what could have been done instead. This was followed by a case study activity, where participants worked in small groups to apply the good-practice principles of bystander action across a range of scenarios about transphobia and transmisogyny.

The day wrapped up with a closing statement from Rainbow Health Australia, urging for further integration and coordination of trans justice and gender equity work, giving participants an opportunity to reflect on the alignment of TGD rights, feminist movements and prevention practice through an applied learning activity.

By creating a supportive environment and providing practical strategies, evaluation findings demonstrate that the Forum succeeded in fostering participants' confidence in becoming active allies in collective work to address transphobia and gender-based discrimination. The event not only facilitated professional development but also cultivated a collective commitment to creating inclusive and supportive environments for TGD individuals within workplaces and communities across the NMR and Victorian Women's Health Services.



WHAT IS TRANSMISOGYNY?

Transmisogyny is used to describe transphobic and misogynistic attitudes that target trans women and trans feminine people. It exists at the intersection of misogyny and transphobia. It can take the form of verbal slurs or defamatory statements attacking the rights, dignity and humanity of trans women and trans feminine people or physical violence. It can also take the form of subtle or indirect comments or actions that further marginalise, belittle, sexualise or invalidate trans women. This can include misgendering, commenting on a trans person's appearance, inappropriate questions about their body or medical history, breaches of confidentiality, or insinuating that trans women are not 'real' women. Transmisogyny can also affect partners, families or carers of trans women and trans feminine people through discrimination, stigma and social exclusion.

Transphobia and transmisogyny are driven by cisnormativity – the idea that the only “normal” and “natural” gender identities are binary and cisgender (Carman et al, 2020), and all other forms of gender expression or identities are considered unhealthy, unnatural and a threat to society.

Transmisogyny impacts trans women and trans feminine people at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels. It is one of the key drivers of violence against trans women and trans feminine people, including intimate partner violence, family violence, street-based abuse and harassment, sexual violence and homicide. It creates barriers to participating in public life as well as access to services that support victims of violence, including primary healthcare, family violence, sexual assault, and homelessness and housing services.

At a societal level, transmisogyny is so widely normalised that it is often seen as a socially acceptable form of discrimination, which makes it difficult to identify and address. Many transphobic myths and stereotypes used to attack and undermine the rights of all trans and gender diverse people centre on transmisogyny. For example, trans women are often cynically positioned as a threat to women and children in bathrooms or women's spaces as a way of opposing the rights of all trans and gender diverse people to access basic amenities. This is contrary to the evidence which shows that trans women are more likely to be victims of violence and sexual assault than cis women (Bagagli et al, 2021).

CONTEXT

The Forum was delivered in a context of increasing intensity of violence, discrimination and exclusion for the TGD community, while the prevention of violence against women sector has been grappling with questions of how to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of gender diverse people in their work.

TGD individuals in Australia continue to face various challenges and experiences of discrimination, reflecting broader societal attitudes and systemic issues that are intensifying over time. These experiences include discrimination in employment, education, healthcare, and housing, leading to economic marginalisation and limited access to essential services.

Nearly 80% of Australians support TGD people having the same rights and protections as everyone else (Equality Australia, 2021). However, a global anti-gender movement is seeking to restrict or deny access to human rights both internationally and in Australia, which is undermining efforts to promote both gender equity and trans justice (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Rising backlash is further driving violence within families, with TGD young people experiencing abuse or having their gender autonomy controlled, denied or delayed (Hill et al, 2020). This backlash commonly focuses on trans women and trans feminine people (Zoe Belle Gender Collective, 2024).

Online abuse is rampant, with eight in ten research participants in the *Fuelling Hate* study reporting an increase in online anti-trans hate since 2020 (Trans Justice Project, 2023). Forms of online hate include misgendering, hate speech, doxing, bullying, stalking, threats of physical and sexual violence, death threats, incitement to suicide and incitement to genocide. Routine transphobia in online spaces may be attributable to factors such as poor content moderation, mis and dis-information, and anti-trans forums organised across social media platforms (Trans Justice Project, 2023).

Mental health concerns, including higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality, are prevalent among TGD people, often exacerbated by societal stigma and lack of support networks. Over 90% of trans men and more than 85% of trans women reported ever having thoughts about suicide, while 60% of trans men and nearly 60% of trans women reported having thoughts about suicide in the previous 12 months (Hill et al, 2020).

These examples show how the human rights of TGD communities are often challenged and denied. TGD individuals face worse health outcomes than cisgender people because of systems and structures built on patriarchal and cisnormative ideas of gender. To tackle stigma, discrimination and violence, we need to intervene at all levels: policy, community, organisations, interpersonal relationships, and individual behaviours.

Interventions need to be evidence-based and while there is no specific primary prevention framework outlining how to address violence against TGD communities, there are broader policy and evidence frameworks that shed light on the drivers of violence against TGD people and potential areas for action. *Pride in Prevention* (Carman et al, 2020), a guide to primary prevention of family violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ communities, says that to prevent violence against LGBTIQ+ people, we need to challenge cisnormativity and heteronormativity as well as promote positive changes in gender norms.

And while *Change the Story* focuses explicitly on the prevention of violence against women, it recognises that rigid, binary views of sex, gender, and sexuality significantly contribute to violence against both women and LGBTIQ+ communities, especially lesbians, bisexual and trans women (Our Watch, 2021). Furthermore, the framework's definition of a woman includes anyone who identifies and lives as a woman, which includes cisgender and trans women. To this end, the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* includes trans women as a target population, however there is no dedicated funding or committed action to include trans women in this body of work.

There is an appetite within the primary prevention of violence against women sector to explore transformative frameworks which are responsive to both the shared and unique drivers of violence against women and TGD individuals and communities.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

While WHIN and other gender equity organisations have transitioned to using the wording gender-based violence across strategies and programs, we use the phrase violence against women in this paper when referring to initiatives within the prevention sector which are grounded in the national framework for the primary prevention of violence against women, *Change the Story*. We do this purposefully to acknowledge that there are limitations in current discourse to adequately describe the shared and unique experiences of violence against women and TGD communities.

KEY THEMES FROM THE FORUM

The *Allyship in Action* Forum provided a new opportunity for learning, collaboration and action, driving tangible progress towards creating inclusive and supportive environments for TGD individuals within our prevention of violence against women work.

A summary of speaker talking points, evaluation data, participant reflections and outputs from Forum activities revealed common threads for learning and collaborative action across the NMR and the broader prevention sector. Four high-level themes stood out as underpinning the success of this next chapter of strengthening prevention practice, which are discussed below. In this next section, gender-based violence refers to violence against women and violence against TGD people.



A SHARED VISION FOR GENDER EQUITY

We need a shared vision for gender transformative change to prevent gender-based violence and promote gender equity. Trans equity work is part of gender equity work because both aim to achieve safe, fair and equitable societies by challenging rigid gender norms and stereotypes. Aligning feminist and trans justice movements offers a chance to unite efforts, pool resources and share power.

We must acknowledge that rising transmisogyny is a direct result of backlash to gender equity work. Targeting one of the most marginalised groups is intentional and strategic, seeking to drive a wedge between trans justice and feminist movements by vilifying trans women and trans feminine people. Together, we must reject both the efforts at division and the wilful misdirection from the issues which undermine the health, safety and wellbeing of women and TGD people.

Misogyny, transphobia, and transmisogyny are interconnected; as long as transphobia and transmisogyny exist, misogyny will too. Transmisogyny is an attack on cis womanhood. There is no way to allow transmisogyny to flourish without allowing misogyny to flourish. Those who oppose trans rights understand this connection to feminist approaches and are strategic in their opposition and violence.

Furthermore, the feminist goals of intersectional justice and gender equality can only be achieved if all women and all LGBTIQ+ people are included as part of a broad, intersectional feminist movement rooted in the universality and indivisibility of human rights.

There is hope and strength in working together strategically and purposefully through strong partnerships, knowledge sharing, and innovative prevention strategies. This vision should also include frameworks that address the common and unique causes of violence against women and TGD communities.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE SHARED PROJECTS

In working towards a shared cause, it is essential that long-term, purpose driven partnerships between gender equity organisations and trans justice organisations are built. Partnership is fundamentally about fostering respectful relationships at the organisational level, therefore need to be considered and cared for like other relationships. These relationships must be equitable, mutually beneficial and acknowledge power dynamics in order to foster genuine collaboration.

When done well, these partnerships can serve as effective vehicles for the equitable distribution of power, enhancing reach and impact to achieve shared success. The combined skills and knowledge of partners often surpasses the sum of their individual contributions. In this case, feminist and trans justice movements each hold unique and complementary expertise that allows us to come together to solve problems we could not solve on our own.

To ensure mutual benefit, it is essential for honest conversations about the joint benefits, interests and risks of the collaboration. This includes clearly identifying what each organisation is getting out of the partnership to ensure it is not merely an extraction of specialist knowledge about the trans experience for the benefit of the mainstream feminist project.

There are many ways larger, mainstream organisations can support equitable, respectful partnerships with smaller, community-based organisations. They can compensate by allocating more resources (time, financial, human) to the shared work, sharing their practice frameworks and tools to support planning and implementation, being flexible with timelines or volunteering to lead the establishment phase of the initiative and then hand over to the lesser-resourced organisation for input with their specialist lens. Larger organisations can also be aware of opportunities to share or concede power such as platforming the transgender perspective in their advocacy, networking spaces, social media and funding relationships.

One of the key benefits of this partnership was the equitable exchange of knowledge and skills and the sharing of resources. WHIN learnt more about how to be accountable as allies and to foster safety and inclusion. ZBGC got access to new tools and frameworks on which to place their lived experience expertise, with the potential of broadening their approach for increased reach. In both cases the learnings and outcomes have been invaluable.



SIX PRINCIPLES FOR COLLABORATION EVIDENT IN THIS PARTNERSHIP

1. Relationships are necessary for collective impact: Systems are made up of people.

Intentional relationship development requires time, vulnerability and tenacity, but the payoff is worthwhile. Collective impact requires a shift in our shared mindset, away from operating in silos.

2. Acknowledging community ownership:

Self-determination must underpin strategies to address violence and discrimination, from the identification of a social problem to its solution.

3. Leading with, and not for, priority communities:

What this means must be negotiated over time and according to context. Each community or group will ask allies to support them in different ways.

4. Be genuine: It's not about being nice or liked, but being open, kind and real. This includes being honest about strengths and weaknesses and where partners can learn from each other.

5. Stepping back, stepping forward or standing with: Consider your role, when and if your support is valuable, and how that support can best be harnessed.

6. Strive for equitable relationships while acknowledging differences in power: There is always power in relationships. Unpack it, and share it; consider safety to explore it, but don't avoid it. Do this consciously and with openness to feedback and correction over time.

PLATFORMING LIVING EXPERIENCE ENHANCES PREVENTION EFFORTS

TGD people have a wealth of experience in challenging rigid gender stereotypes and fighting for social change, which is a form of knowledge and insight that can help to refine our practice and inspire our action.

Hearing directly from people who have had experiences of discrimination helps make our theoretical frameworks more practical. We know that building skills and professional development are crucial for improving how we and our communities address gender-based violence. Capability building approaches are more effective when based on real-life examples, which can enhance skill-building and encourage collective action against violence and discrimination.

It can also help to challenge our biases and assumptions, promote reflective practice, and sensitise us to noticing discrimination. Identifying harmful behaviours and interpreting them as a problem helps us to develop the confidence and capability needed to take action.

However, a lot of work needs to go into creating an enabling environment so that sharing one's living experience is safe. Some ways to do this include safety planning in and around the event, having clearly identified support officers to respond to any distress experienced by panellists and participants, and agreeing that any resistance or inappropriate comments should be addressed by the cisgender allies in the room. The wellbeing of lived experience advocates must be paramount, which can be supported with debriefing after the event. Appropriate safety planning should integrate a trauma-informed approach and be overseen by trusted parties.

INVITATION TO ALLIES TO TAKE ACTION

Permission is given for all allies to actively address transphobia and transmisogyny – that's what being an ally is about! Unfortunately, we heard during the Forum multiple times that bystander action very rarely occurs in instances of transphobia and transmisogyny, a sad reality that can cause just as much harm as the transphobia itself. Without the support and intervention of cisgender people, these forms of discrimination will only continue.

Bystander action is a powerful tool for prevention of violence. However, in the process of centring lived experience, too often we think this means that we cannot act on behalf of others. This results in the effective condoning of discrimination and violence against the most victimised and impacted. Fear of making a mistake or overstepping results in no action being taken.

A structured approach to bystander work can help break it down and make it easier to understand and apply. Both individuals and organisations can be good bystanders against transphobia and transmisogyny. The prevention sector has skills and knowledge around bystander action and managing resistance and backlash. We must harness this and work together with TGD-led organisations to form a proactive response that considers backlash against both gender equity and TGD programs.

Everyone has the permission to act – doing nothing will only allow hate to flourish. Gender equity and violence against women prevention organisations, rather than stepping back, must push forward and act collectively to protect and promote LGBTIQ+ people's equality and rights, recognising that our human rights are interconnected and will either progress or regress together.

CONCLUSION

Robust well-functioning partnership arrangements are needed to support collaborative action that moves from fragmentation to a united response against the anti-gender movement. Gender equity work is an important vehicle for mutually reinforcing social benefit. Mainstream gender equity and violence against women organisations are well-placed to work alongside TGD community organisations to strengthen collaborative action that addresses the shared drivers of gender-based violence.

This Forum demonstrated that there is an appetite within the prevention of violence against women sector to explore transformative frameworks that are responsive to both the shared and unique drivers of violence against women and TGD individuals and communities. Partnerships between these organisations should be encouraged and appropriately funded to ensure that this strengthens the capacity and sustainability of trans-led organisations.

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