

Submission of Evidence for the Reform of the Gender Recognition Act Inquiry 2020

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I am a Lecturer at the University of Sussex who, amongst other things, has researched and published academic work on LGBT access to sexual violence support services.

Summary

- Previous research suggests that trans people experience high rates of domestic and sexual violence, but experience barriers to accessing support services
- Our study investigated this further and found that trans survivors expressed fear of discrimination, being ‘outed,’ and a lack of understanding from sexual violence support services
- Our study further recommended that these services develop trans-friendly and community-engaged practices to improve this

Evidence

This submission has been written in response to the following question in the Committee’s call for evidence:

What issues do trans people have in accessing support services, including health and social care services, domestic violence and sexual violence services?

In 2015-2016, I and a team of researchers addressed this question in a published study (Love et al., 2017). The full paper can be accessed here:

<https://doi.org/10.1332/204986017X14933954425266>.

The research investigated specific barriers marginalised individuals (including trans people) face in accessing sexual violence support services and how they could be solved, using data from a case study conducted in the city of Brighton and Hove, UK. One of the marginalised communities we researched as part of this study were trans survivors of sexual violence.

Background

There is limited data on trans experiences of sexual violence, but the data that is available suggests that trans people are subject to high rates of harassment and discrimination for their perceived non-conformity. One study estimates that 64% of trans people have been victims of sexual assault in their lifetime (Grant, Mottet & Tanis, 2011). Another estimates that trans

people are more likely to experience domestic violence and abuse than heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men (Browne, 2007).

Despite this, previous research suggested that uptake of sexual violence support services amongst trans survivors is relatively low. Potential reasons for this have been identified by Rymer and Cartei (2015), who found that 91% of trans survivors in their study feared their gender identity would affect the support they got, citing fear of discrimination and lack of information on trans-friendly services as major barriers. Their study also found that trans survivors expressed concern about support services' lack of understanding of how trans identity can affect someone's experience of sexual violence, and expressed mistrust towards services due to negative past experiences. This is despite many representatives of support services in Britain reporting a commitment to supporting trans women in their single-sex women-only and mixed-sex services (Stonewall, 2018).

Our study set out to further investigate what barriers trans and other marginalised survivors of sexual violence experienced in accessing sexual violence support services, and what might be done about this. We distributed questionnaires to survivors of sexual violence in Brighton and Hove, and professionals who work with them. We then went on to interview a small sample of these participants.

Findings

Professionals who worked at sexual violence support services reported that barriers to trans people accessing support services include:

- A fear of stigma and discrimination from professionals
- The fear of being 'outed' to small, tight-knit communities, especially if the abuser is a member of the same small group.
- Survivors who identify with marginalised groups may also feel pressure to avoid inviting scrutiny or negative judgment onto their communities
- The feeling that sexual violence support services are 'not for' anyone but heterosexual, cis women
- Support services for sexual violence support may be far down the list of a marginalised survivors' priorities if they are facing other issues like insecure housing or poverty.

Survivors of sexual violence also reported on barriers they face to support services:

Written evidence submitted by Dr Gillian Love [GRA0902]

- Fifty percent of respondents did not seek help after their experience of sexual violence because they feared discrimination based on their sexuality or gender identity.
- Twenty-five percent reported they did seek help but were discriminated against because of their sexuality or gender identity.
- Trans inclusion in sexual violence support services is not always made clear to potential users; for example, one interview respondent said:

“When I was raped after I had come out as trans I knew there were very, very few places that dealt with men who had experienced rape and doubted very much those places had had trans training, and didn't want to have to explain what I was or justify myself in order to seek help.”

Professionals and survivors suggested potential solutions to the above barriers, which included:

- Trans-friendly services and inclusive advertising - Trans respondents reported that it was important that services clearly advertised whether they were women-only or not, and used the right terminology, for example one questionnaire respondent wrote:
“Clearly state that trans people including non-binary people are welcome. If it's for all genders, state this. If it's for all genders other than men, say this rather than 'women'.”
- By and for/Community led – Professionals said that an organization serving a particular community should have solid representation from that community in its workforce. Survivors agreed; seventy-five percent of trans respondents considered it quite or very important to disclose to a person of the same gender identity as them, for example.
- Accessibility - The intersection of oppressed identities and poverty (Uhrig, 2015) means that issues of finance are particularly salient for trans people. Several professionals explained that some of their services were free or on a sliding scale; others provided free meals at drop-ins and similar services.
- Cultural competence – staff training to understand how best to support trans survivors

Summary and solutions

- Trans survivors of sexual violence face a number of barriers to accessing sexual violence support services including fear of discrimination, fear of ‘outing,’ and a concern that services are not well versed in catering to trans survivors
- Survivors and professionals who work with them have suggested that trans-friendly services that have strong connections to the LGBT community and are fully accessible would lower these barriers

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