

WELCOMING SOCIAL WELLNESS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF OLDER GENDER AND SEXUALLY DIVERSE WOMEN'S WELLBEING AND SENSE OF BELONGING

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Background: Older gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) women report significant barriers to mental and physical wellbeing associated with challenges in securing connections with health care providers and local community support groups. Perceptions of bias have been linked to avoidance of engagement with these services, with health care usage and satisfaction being lower for GSD women than for their heterosexual counterparts.

Methods: This year-long, mixed-methods project sought to examine older (55+) GSD women's experiences with health, social and aged-care services in efforts to understand how interactions with these services may either support or pose challenges to their mental and physical wellbeing. This paper presents preliminary findings from interviews with eight women used to investigate women's experiences with local and community services, exploring themes of support, engagement, perceived bias, individual disclosure and community connection.

Results: The findings indicate that older women with diverse genders and sexualities continue to experience stigma and marginalisation from healthcare institutions, which impact their health outcomes. Practitioners often assume patients are heterosexual, and fail to take into account their specific needs as lesbian and transwomen with intersecting identities. The women in this study express concerns about aged care services as being heteronormative, homophobic, and not able to support their needs. They respond by considering and adopting strategies for remaining safe, such as staying invisible to their carer, and recommend the need for greater LGBTIQ+ staff training and LGBTIQ+ friendly facilities.

Conclusion: Preliminary findings point to the need for more explicit training of health care and social service providers. Clearly, general acknowledgment and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity plays an important part in supporting older GSD women. Importantly, evidence that institutions and service providers recognise the intersectional identities and support needs of GSD women makes a larger difference to women's engagement and uptake of services.

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