

Discrimination leaves lesbian and bisexual women facing depression, anxiety and alcohol problems

October 3 2014, by Liz Banks-Anderson

Homophobia and inadequate social support are contributing to high rates of mental health problems and alcohol use among lesbian and bisexual women, a University of Melbourne study has found.

The ALICE project, funded by beyondblue, examined alcohol use among 520 lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) [women](#) throughout Australia and the ways in which alcohol use and mental health are interrelated.

Although the majority of project participants drank alcohol at safe levels, it was found 40 per cent drank at harmful levels above the National Health and Medical Research Council recommended safe limits, compared with 16 per cent of people in the general population.

Very few LBQ women drinking at harmful levels sought health care support for their alcohol use. In contrast, health services were used for [mental health care](#) by 39 per cent of women, and this was more likely when women had a regular GP, and were connected to the LBQ community.

Study leader Associate Professor Ruth McNair said it is a great concern that so many LBQ women are experiencing alcohol and [mental health problems](#).

"Our study has identified that the stress these women experience because of their minority status strongly contributes to these problems. For example, problematic drinking and poorer mental health were associated with homophobic harassment and discrimination, hiding sexual orientation, lower levels of social support and lower levels of connection to the mainstream community."

"More than 50 per cent of women in the study had experienced depression or suicidal thoughts and more than 40 per cent had suffered from anxiety during their lifetime," she said.

"The study also found that 30 per cent of women had experienced discrimination in the past year, and this was more common for queer and lesbian women, than for [bisexual women](#)."

beyondblue CEO Georgie Harman said the research confirmed the devastating effect that homophobia has on mental health.

"With these stark figures, no one can debate the devastating and sometimes tragic impact of homophobia. Why should anyone be made to feel like crap just for being themselves? There is no excuse for unacceptable words, statements, actions or behaviours that demean, offend or intimidate others."

"This latest research supports beyondblue's commitment to keep reminding Australians about the impact of discrimination on the [mental health](#) of those who may be seen as different," she said.

"We will re-launch our successful Stop. Think. Respect 'Left Handed' campaign, which compares the ridiculousness of discriminating against someone who is left-handed with homophobia, later this year. This campaign and other initiatives such as our Rainbow Women Help-Seeking Behavior research project and Families Like Mine, continue our

commitment to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, tran and intersex communities," Ms Harman said.

It has previously been assumed that dysfunctional attitudes and behaviour within the LBQ community has led to harmful drinking. However the research shows that it is negative social attitudes rather than factors within the LBQ community that has led to harmful drinking. "The ALICE study shows that the culture of drinking in LBQ communities was no more normalised than it is in mainstream Australian society," Associate Professor Ruth McNair said.

The findings from the project are being used to develop an online self-help resource available at the Turning Point Directline site aimed at reducing harmful drinking patterns among LBQ women and this resource will include optional phone counselling. An online training module on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans) [alcohol](#) and drug use for health providers is also in development in collaboration with Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria.

Provided by University of Melbourne

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