

8th April 2024

Australian Human Rights Commission
GPO Box 5218
Sydney NSW 2001

Dear Australian Human Rights Commission,

Walkern Katatdjín (Rainbow Knowledge) Project: Submission for the current and emerging threats to TGD human rights

This submission describes findings from TGD participants in the Walkern Katatdjín project, which is a national research project that has collected data on the social emotional wellbeing, mental health, and service needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people (14-25 years). The aims of the project are first described, followed by an outline of our research teams' relevant expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young peoples' health and wellbeing and their experiences of discrimination. We then outline findings from our national survey of N = 283 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young people. This submission closes with a call for the Australian Human Rights Commission to consider the unique and additional threats to TGD young people who are also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

About Walkern Katatdjín

The [Walkern Katatdjín \(Rainbow Knowledge\)](http://www.rainbowknowledge.org) project is a research project aimed at understanding the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB), mental health and service needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people (14-25 years), including TGD young people. This group of young people live at the intersection of three vulnerable identity groups (young, Indigenous, queer) leading to unique challenges and opportunities. Youth specifically have lower control and agency over their healthcare options and experiences. Catalysed by community advocacy and need, we have spent the last six years developing an extensive evidence-base on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people in Australia, their hopes, dreams and challenges, and what they say will improve their experiences in community and health services experiences, ultimately leading to their improved health and wellbeing.

This work has culminated in the [Walkern Katatdjín Phase 2 National Survey Community Report](#) [1] which is publicly available on our website www.rainbowknowledge.org. 42.6% of the 619 participants in the Walkern Katatdjín survey were trans (TGD). This makes the Walkern Katatdjín data set the largest dataset available on TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. TGD participants are defined here as participants who stated that their gender was different to that on their birth certificate. 63.3% of TGD participants were non-binary and 22.8% were men. The vast majority of TGD participants were also sexuality diverse.

The report made several recommendations for individuals, families and community, services and government. These recommendations have been endorsed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people, community members and leading Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

The Research Team Expertise

Walkern Katatdjín is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ researchers and advocates and governed by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ Youth Advisory Group and Governance Committee. This team includes Aboriginal TGD researchers and advisors. The lead project investigator, Prof Ashleigh Lin, has extensive expertise in TGD health and is currently the President of the Australian Professional Association for Trans Health (AusPATH). Other project investigators are experts in youth mental health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ social emotional wellbeing and mental health.

This submission is further supported by Madi Day and Dameyon Bonson. Madi Day is a researcher focused on coloniality and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQIASB+ populations. They co-authored a 2022 report with Black Rainbow on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQIASB+

People and the COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2023 Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing report Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQI+ people and mental health and wellbeing. Daymeon Bonson is an Aboriginal LGBTQIA+ activist and research, LGBTQIA+SB Organizational Cultural Competency Practitioner, and founder of Black Rainbow, Australia's first national volunteer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQIA+SB social enterprise in the pursuit of positive health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual, Sistergirl and Brotherboys (LGBTQIA+SB).

Threat to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD Young Peoples' Survival, Mental Health and Social Emotional Wellbeing

The survey findings indicate that TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience challenges to their social emotional wellbeing and equal access to healthcare that represent a threat to their right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

Very high psychological distress. 81.3% of trans participants scored in the 'very high' distress range on the Kessler-5 measure [2] of recent psychological distress. Levels of psychological distress were significantly higher among trans versus cis participants.

Suicide ideation, suicide plans and attempts.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, up to 1 in 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young people have had a recent suicide attempt, **with over 1 in 2 having a lifetime suicide attempt.** Compared to cis participants, trans participants were nearly twice as likely to report a suicide attempt in their lifetime were 1.8 times more likely to report suicide ideation in the last 12 months. These figures are alarming especially given that participants in the survey were as young as 14 years and demonstrate a very real threat to TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young lives.

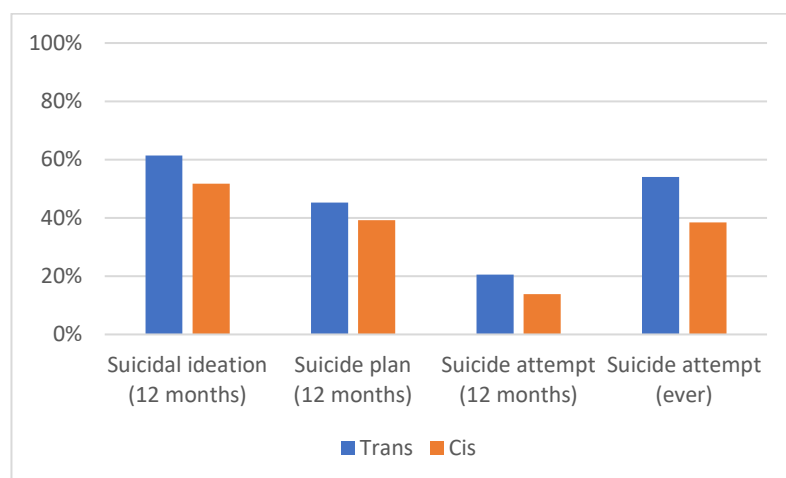


Figure 1: Percentage of trans and cis participants with reported suicide behaviours. N = 215

Healthcare Discrimination

We asked participants their experiences when accessing mainstream, LGBTQIA+ specific, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health services.

When attending *mainstream health services*, 45.5% of TGD participants expected to have a bad experience because they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQIA+, whereas only 38.8% expected to be treated equally at these services. Alarming, **28.1% of TGD participants had been made to feel like they mattered less because they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQIA+, in a mainstream health service**, while 35.6% had heard rude or hurtful comments about their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQIA+ identity while accessing mainstream health services.

Regarding LGBTQIA+- specific health services:

8.5% of TGD participants said that an LGBTQA+ specific service would not see them because they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. 11.9% said they felt like they received worse service because they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Just under half (40.7%) said that they had hurtful or hurtful comments about their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity when accessing LGBTQA+ specific health services.

Regarding Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services:

50% of TGD participants did not feel that they were treated equally because they were LGBTQA+. Over a quarter (26.1%) of TGD participants did not feel safe telling an Aboriginal health service that they were LGBTQA+, and just under a third (32.6%) expected to have a bad experience because they were LGBTQA+. 16.7% were made to feel like they mattered less when they access an Aboriginal health service and 30.3% heard rude, hurtful or ignorant comments about their LGBTQA+ identity when accessing an Aboriginal health service.

The findings highlight current ways in which TGD participants are experiencing discrimination and poorer quality of service when accessing healthcare.

Experiences of Daily Microaggressions

The vast majority of TGD participants reported experiencing racist microaggressions within the LGBTQA+ community and cisheterosexist microaggressions within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the past 12 months. The most frequently endorsed racial and LGBTQA+ based microaggressions by trans participants were having a hard time finding friends who were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQA+ (82.9%), not having Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ role models (78.6%), having to educate non-Indigenous LGBTQA+ people about race/cultural issues (77.4%) and non-Indigenous LGBTQA+ people saying racist things (73.4%). These figures speak to the daily burden experienced by trans Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in both queer and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Further, this likely indicates that these communities that young people may participate in to receive support and affirmation can also be sources of further stress. With this in mind, it cannot be assumed that spaces designed for/by non-Indigenous TGD young people will be welcoming or supportive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young people unless they are created with a culturally competent and anti-racist approach.

Additionally, cisheterosexism within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community may be a contributing factor towards cultural disconnection and threat to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young people's social and emotional wellbeing.

Threats to Social Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB)

SEWB was measured across the domains of connection to Country, Culture, community, spirit and ancestors, body, mind and emotions, and family and kinships.

Key SEWB findings were:

- Only 28.4% of TGD participants reported that their family got along well together, with only 40% agreeing that they had strong ties to family and kinship links.
- Less than half of TGD participants (47.7%) felt that their LGBTQA+ identity was accepted by the parents/caregivers, with fewer still feeling supported by parents/caregivers (37.6%), siblings (46.1%) and extended family (23.3%).
- Only 31.5% of TGD participants felt their LGBTQA+ identity was accepted by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elders in their community.
- 63.5% of TGD participants never or rarely took part in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices.

Intersectionality, coloniality, and racism

TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's experiences are uniquely shaped by their location at the intersection of Indigeneity and gender diversity. Similarly, the threats to their human rights and wellbeing occur through the interplay of oppressive structures, and cannot be understood without reference to both transphobia *and* racism.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander attitudes towards gender and gender diversity were irreversibly disrupted by the advent of colonialism [3, 4]. Colonialism imposed new understandings of gender that were enforced through harmful systems such as protectionism and missions, and TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain subject to laws made by majority-non-Indigenous governments. The ongoing consequences of colonialism on TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's wellbeing can be seen through their frequent experiences of racism and engagement in culturally incompetent systems. As stated above, 35.6% had heard rude or hurtful comments about their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQA+ identity while accessing mainstream health services and just under half (40.7%) said that they had hurt rude or hurtful comments about their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity when accessing LGBTQA+ specific health services. The vast majority of TGD participants reported experiencing racist microaggressions within the LGBTQA+ community. Efforts to address transphobia that do not engage with the entangled impacts of racism are likely to be insufficient to meet the needs of TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Necessity of a strengths-based approach

This submission has set out to name the threats to TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's wellbeing, in the context of the systemic marginalisation, and the resulting challenges to these young people's wellbeing. This does not take away from the necessity of taking a strengths-based approach when working to promote the rights of minoritised peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have long experienced the erosion of our human rights as a consequence of dominant narratives that position us deficit, incapable, and responsible for our own disadvantage. By working in partnership, it is possible to leverage the strengths of TGD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

TGD participants felt a strong sense of belonging to the LGBTQA+ community, and 41.1% agreed that they also belonged to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ community. The majority agreed that there is a place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in the LGBTQA+ community, and that there is a place for LGBTQA+ people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture. 72.1% of TGD participants often/very often spent time learning about LGBTQA+ culture and history and 54.5% spent time learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture. TGD participants were overwhelmingly proud to be themselves, with 91.4% reporting they were proud to be LGBTQA+ and 85.3% reporting they were proud to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. They report significantly higher Identity Centrality when compared to cis participants, with 84.5% agreeing that being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQA+ was an important part of who they are. As one participant stated: *"I feel proud to continue the legacies of those lgbtq+ and First Nations people. I want to be a role model to those who come after me."*

Summary

This submission describes findings from 283 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young people who participated in the Walkern Katatdjijin national survey. We call for the Australian Human Rights Commission to consider the unique and additional threats to TGD young people who are also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Findings indicated the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young people experience challenges to their wellbeing associated with interlinked transphobia and racism, compounded by discrimination in health. 81.3% of TGD participants in the national survey scored 'very high' levels of psychological distress and over 1 in 2 had attempted suicide in their lifetime. This is incommensurable with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TGD young people's rights to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and access to healthcare free from discrimination.

In line with recommendations from the [Walkern Katatdjijin Phase 2 National Survey Community Report](#) we suggest that the Australian Human Rights Commission consults with Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander TGD young people to incorporate their strengths and perspectives into the success of the project, and ensure project outcomes will be relevant to their needs.

Sincerely,

The Walkern Katatdjin project team, Madi Day, and Dameyon Bonson

1. Liddelow-Hunt, S., et al., *Walkern Katatdjin (Rainbow Knowledge) Phase 2 National Survey Community Report*. 2023: Perth, WA.
2. Kessler, R.C., et al., *Screening for serious mental illness in the general population*. Archives of general psychiatry, 2003. **60**(2): p. 184-189.
3. O'Sullivan, S., *The Colonial Project of Gender (and Everything Else)*. Genealogy, 2021. **5**(3): p. 67.
4. Day, M., *Remembering Lugones: The Critical Potential of Heterosexuality for Studies of So-Called Australia*. Genealogy (Basel), 2021. **5**(3): p. 71.