

1st March, 2012

Senate Legal and Constitutional Inquiry into allowing same sex couples the right to marry.

To Whom It May Concern,

I am presenting this Submission as the National Spokesperson for parents with lesbian daughters and gay sons. And as such, I am encouraging the Committee to look favourably on the issue of marriage equality.

It needs to be kept in mind when making your decision on this issue that it isn't only the couple affected but also their immediate and extended family and friends which make up quite a large proportion of Australians.

Anecdotally, I believe one in five families have a loved one identifying as gay or lesbian whether family members realise it or not. And, as Australians, we bring our children into this world believing this country has a free and equal society, but when a loved one "comes out" we soon learn this is a myth.

We also need to keep in mind that homosexuality is a natural sexual orientation. It is not a choice, fad, phase or easier lifestyle, as some suggest. Furthermore, it has nothing to do with parenting skills (good or bad). Furthermore, the homosexual orientation was removed as a mental illness by the American and Australian Psychiatric Associations and American and Australian Psychological Associations in the 1970's and the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 1990. Sexual orientation is like eye colour, nobody gets to choose.

It should be noted that our lesbian daughters and gay sons want no more or less than their heterosexual siblings, which is to just be equal. And we as their parents also want equality for them which include the right to marry their partner of choice regardless of sexual orientation.

Marriage for any couples regardless of sexual orientation is about:

- the instant recognition that comes with marriage
- the symbolism and celebration
- removal of next of kin issues
- social commitments
- official recognition of the relationship by family and friends
- minimising of legal issues
- planning a future life together
- sharing sexual pleasure
- the respect that automatically comes with couples being married
- emotional security and stability that marriage brings to a relationship
- about how the couple personally value their relationship

As parents we believe our sons and daughters have the right to marry because:

- They pay taxes and contribute equally to society with their talents and careers
- As our children we love them equally and want to see them in stable loving relationships
- We want them to celebrate their relationship the same as their brothers and sisters
- They have done nothing wrong and shouldn't be penalised just because they were born gay or lesbian

It is important to note that we as parents regardless of wealth or love can provide the most stable loving home environment and provide them with the best education but we cannot buy or provide them with equality. Worse still, regardless of who they are, or how hard they work they cannot earn or buy their own equality. Only the government can provide this.

Mental Health Issues:

We believe that if allowed to marry it will minimise depression and substance abuse that comes with low self esteem and unfortunately, many of our sons and daughters in the LGBT community do

suffer mental health issues because of how they feel about themselves which is mainly due to societal attitudes and them being told in some subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways they are inferior. This is why suicidal ideation is such a problem in the LGBT community. Marriage equality will be a huge step forward in this area, because it will show that the government no longer condones discrimination under the cloak of “tradition” and the outdated belief of “marriage being between a man and a woman”.

I do know things have improved with the removal of economic discrimination in 2008, but same sex couples still live with the discrimination of knowing they cannot have their relationships seen as equal. This is an enormous emotional bag to carry and for many too difficult to even try to form long stable relationships, because they feel they are set up to fail before they begin, especially if family members aren't supportive of the individual being LGBT.

A study done by the Catholic Church in 2004 shows that marriage increases fidelity, people suffer less depression and have a more positive outlook on life which is great, but this outcome is surely not only applicable to opposite sex couples? We as parents of LGBT want our sons and daughters to have the same opportunity and hopes and to experience these benefits with their relationships.

Marriage is evolving:

- marriages between people of colour and white Australians are no longer frowned upon
- Indigenous Australians no longer have to seek permission from their Protectorate to marry
- Catholic and Protestant marriages are no longer frowned upon with Priest telling the family the children are illegitimate
- many couples even feel there is no longer a need to marry and are choosing to live in de facto relationships
- women have gone from very limited rights in a marriage to equality and conjugal rights is no longer an excuse for rape in marriage

Marriage is a legal institution in flux and is always being shaped and reshaped. Unfortunately, marriage, for many opposite sex couples is becoming irrelevant but to same sex couples it still has relevance and meaning.

We need to ask many couples who are in fear of losing the “sanctity of marriage”, to which marriage do they refer? The first, second or sometimes third marriage because marriage and the meaning of it being “for better or worse, sickness and in health and let no man put asunder” no longer applies because the meaning of marriage and what couples now expect from marriage have changed.

Marriage to same sex couples is not an outdated institution, as it is for some opposite sex couples. It's about the symbolism not the practical. Most people marry for love and the commitment that comes with marriage. Marriage is about making a statement to your partner, your families and the term “marriage”, sends a clear message about the relationship and what it means to the couple, to the world and this is what same sex couples want.

Religious Issues:

The Private Members Bills introduced into the House of Representatives mid February all agree that churches should not be forced to marry anyone, including same sex couples. And we, as the parents of lesbians and gays agree, No religious body should be forced to do anything, in which they disapprove, for example priests not being forced to marry divorced couples in the Catholic Church. Additionally, a Galaxy Poll taken last year showed that the majority of Christians agree with marriage equality.

It should be noted that Christian countries are now legislating for marriage equality. Countries such as Spain, Portugal, Argentina and Mexico are all very conservative Christian countries and there has been no negative impact with this new legislation; so why would it be different here?

Studies are showing that the rate of marriages and divorces has also not altered in these countries that allow same sex couples to marry.

Polls are constantly, showing that Australians generally are ready to include same sex couples in their quest for equality and the right to marry their partner of choice.

Being able to marry does not suggest that to be married is a form of Utopia, but it provides the couple the right to make the same choices, mistakes and actions as their heterosexual counterparts. Marriage cannot be trivialised or demeaned by allowing same sex couples to marry. The only people who can trivialise or demean a relationship are the couple themselves.

In conclusion, what marriage equality will do is remove the feeling from our sons and daughters that they are seen as second rate citizens with second rate relationships and provide them with the same rights, responsibilities, privileges and choices as their siblings, colleagues and society generally which is the right to have their relationships legally celebrated and recognised in their home country.

Yours sincerely

Shelley Argent OAM
President PFLAG Brisbane Inc.
National Spokesperson PFLAG
Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays