



Victorian Pride Lobby

Breaking the Rainbow Ceiling

LBQ+ women standing for public office

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Introduction

This is first-of-its-kind Australian research into the barriers and motivators for lesbian, bi+ and queer (LBQ+) women to stand for office and is based on similar research conducted by the United States Victory Institute. The findings show common barriers and motivators mentioned by LBQ+ women in relation to standing for office. It is both a guide on actions to increase representation for LBQ+ women as well as a starting point for future research.

The 2020 Victorian local government elections saw a record number of LBQ+ women elected to local councils right across the state. However, the election itself was not all positive. The Local Government Inspectorate received numerous complaints of sexism, harassment, bullying, threats and intimidation. Women candidates bore the brunt of this behaviour. These are the challenges many LBQ+ women face when standing for office; the challenges that often dissuade them from standing for election in the first place.

So what obstacles discourage LBQ+ women from standing? And what motivates them to take the leap? There is a wealth of research on the barriers and motivators for women standing for office, yet most of it implicitly or explicitly assumes women to be heterosexual (and cisgender or endosex). This ignores the unique realities LBQ+ women face when standing or making the decision to stand - realities rooted in sexism, homophobia and biphobia. Understanding these dynamics is critical to increasing the number of LBQ+ women who can safely stand without facing additional hurdles and blatant misogyny.

The Victorian Pride Lobby set out to uncover the barriers LBQ+ women face when standing or deciding to stand for office, as well as what motivates them to consider public service. This was done in the context of the establishment of the Local Government Victoria Gender Equality Advisory Committee and the Victorian Government's target of 50% women councillors by 2025.

This research included an extensive online survey conducted and analysed by Lobby volunteers. The survey was developed to identify the reasons Victorian LBQ+ women hesitated standing for office as well as what motivated them to consider standing for office. The survey was open to all Victorians identifying both as women and as lesbian, bi+ or queer who had stood for office, who had considered a run and who had not.

This research includes trans and intersex LBQ+ women because it goes without saying that trans and intersex women are women. Whilst this survey focuses on the experiences of women based on their sexual orientation, it is important to acknowledge that trans and intersex women face unique barriers to standing for office. The Lobby understands and acknowledges that a person's gender identity, sex characteristics, race, religion, culture, disabilities and socio-economic status also have an impact on their decision to stand. We note that this survey did not include non-binary people who may have unique experiences, and that further research is needed to understand and respond to these issues and elect more trans and intersex women and non-binary people to public office.

This is a small study, rather than a comprehensive account, of the challenges that LBQ+ women often encounter when standing for office. It is intended to be a guide for community organisations, local councils and their peak bodies, political parties and government and allies on how to improve political representation for LBQ+ women, as well as a starting point for future research.

Just what the effects of the sexism, harassment, bullying, threats and intimidation during the 2020 council elections were on LBQ+ women is unknown. But LBQ+ women across the state were watching, confirming fears and being discouraged from standing. It is on us all to understand the barriers to standing for political office and learn the motivators to take advantage of them.

It is only through genuine understanding and meaningful action that we can "break the rainbow ceiling" and achieve equitable representation in our councils and parliaments.

Nevena Spirovska and Evie Potter

Victorian Pride Lobby Co-Convenors

Barriers to standing

From the survey respondents, five common themes emerged about the barriers LBQ+ women face when considering whether to stand for public office. While some barriers are similar to those heterosexual women report, LBQ+ women often view or experience these barriers differently because of their sexual orientation or face entirely new barriers not reported by heterosexual women.

The barriers presented here are far from exhaustive but represent the themes most prevalent in the survey responses. As one respondent put it: “Just the fact that I’m a female is a barrier, let alone anything else!” in the words of another:

Any woman considering politics would have to be very thick skinned. There is significant gender inequality within public office and throughout the general community.

Prejudice

Some respondents feared how they would be perceived or judged and even feared public attacks or backlash based on their gender or sexual orientation. This included fear of stigma, discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment or abuse - and, now, a fear of violence or assaults, including by elected representatives.

This fear was particularly so for those who were not out publicly or only partially out; those that live in regional areas; and those with partners or children whom they feared would also be targeted or exposed to adverse public scrutiny.

As one respondent described:

If I was in the public eye I could well lose control over where personal information ends up, and some of my political opponents have too much information on me. I don't fit a gold star asexual narrative, and having that dragged out in public would be super distressing.

It was not only attacks from political opponents that respondents feared, but also the fear of having to defend attacks by the media. And it was not only attacks based on sexual orientation but also sexual practices that respondents feared, especially so for those who were involved in sex work or kink or bondage communities.

Whilst a person’s sexual orientation and consensual sexual practices should not impact their ability to stand for office, there was a fear that these often personal attributes - as well as things like past or present use of drugs - could be seen as unpalatable to certain constituencies. There was a further fear that ‘shit sheets’ could be circulated by political opponents to play on these prejudices. Some did not know how to manage this and feared being shamed into keeping secrets.

LBQ+ women have learned to deal with experiences of judgment and sometimes even hatred in their private lives but rightfully fear being exposed to this by the public at large. For some, their experience of the Australian marriage law postal survey still haunted them and affected their decision to stand.

Trans respondents feared transphobia, asexual respondents feared sexual harassment and respondents with intersex variations faced misunderstanding and sometimes attacks:

As someone that's intersex, I've been misrepresented by media and opponents, attacked for my intersex status.

These prejudices can manifest as slurs by trolls on social media or graffiti on yard signs or corrflutes - attacks that are often particularly targeted at LBQ+ women candidates. These attacks are rooted in misogyny, homophobia and biphobia and can have a detrimental effect on those who decide to stand.

Some respondents feared the systemic sexism, misogyny and homo-/bi-/ace-phobia of parliaments and councils, and that they could struggle to gain support and respect - and even face ridicule - from others standing for and elected to public office. Respondents surmised public office as having a “toxic male culture.”

One respondent who stood for public office described it as “typical older white male stuff” and another respondent who made the choice not to stand concluded:

I decided that the culture of politics towards women is too awful. Look at how they treated Julia Gillard.

Politics was seen by respondents as a male-dominated environment where women are ignored and, if they do speak up, are marked out and made to move on. There was seen to be a preponderance of “bad” men in political office. Some concluded that they simply would not be safe in politics.

Lack of confidence

Some respondents feared being in the public eye and the public scrutiny that this may entail. Some lacked confidence in navigating coming and being out publicly as a political candidate or elected representative. As one described:

I have only begun to identify as bi in the past few years, after I had already been elected. It has been and still is quite awkward to navigate coming out while you already have a public profile... and I am still trying to work my way through that.

For some, this depended on whether they were visibly queer - candidates who were saw this as a barrier to standing for political office. There was also a general feeling that LBQ+ women are subject to greater public scrutiny in public office. Some respondents were uncertain about how to manage the line between public and private life, whether maintaining that divide is possible in public office and how information about their private lives may be used to portray them or their families.

Some respondents lacked the necessary confidence in their abilities and skills, including language skills, to stand for public office. However, most did not raise lack of qualifications as a barrier to standing for office.

Lack of support

Many respondents reported a lack of support for LBQ+ women entering politics. Some felt a lack of support from the public. Others felt a lack of understanding from colleagues and were still building relationships and support within their political party before making the decision to stand for office.

One respondent reported they had “trouble convincing senior men in the party that I was serious about preselection”, another that they were given bad advice. One observed that political parties failed to provide safety and support for women and LBQ+ people.

Some lamented the lack of role models and peer support from amongst the LBQ+ community. As one respondent surmised:

There are no tangible safety nets for queer women who choose to run for public office. Putting yourself on the line and being and staying authentic can be risky.

At the other end of the spectrum, some respondents who had stood for public office felt that they were micromanaged and not given the right kind of support - and freedom - they needed to campaign effectively. Some felt that their views would be dismissed by colleagues because of their gender or sexual orientation.

Respondents with a disability felt that their disability - and ableism or lack of support for disabilities - was an obstacle to standing for office. Respondents with children worried about maintaining a work-life balance. Some respondents felt that standing for office would take a lot of work and time. This was particularly so for LBQ+ women with children or caring responsibilities. Support is necessary to address these practical burdens to standing.

Some respondents felt that if they were elected and then left public office, they would face barriers to employment post-politics.

Lack of representation

Political role models are an extremely important factor in the decision to stand, yet a common phenomenon was being “the only woman.” Victoria has one of the lowest numbers of people who identify as LGBTIQ+ of any parliament in Australia. There are currently no openly LBQ+ women in the Ministry or Shadow Ministry. There has never been a trans, non-binary or intersex woman elected to the Victorian parliament. There has never been an openly LBQ+ woman elected to the Legislative Assembly and only one ever elected to the Legislative Council. For this and many other reasons, politics is often seen as a “boys’ club” and, when those considering standing for office look at the way that women and LBQ+ people are treated in public office, the picture can be grim:

Seeing how female politicians are treated is a major deterrent. I would love to live in a world where someone like me would feel safe to run, but it's just not a reality at the moment. We have a lot of work to do.

Some felt that LBQ+ women were effectively erased from politics. This ties in to the lack of support discussed above and could be alleviated through mentorship, training and networking programs and the like.

Some respondents looked at other women in politics who did not represent their views and questioned whether they would be able to progress in politics as a result. Others felt that they would be accepted in politics based on the experience of other LBQ+ women in public office whom they knew and admired:

My party already has a bisexual woman in a leadership position so I feel like I would be accepted.

We discuss the positive effects of representation and support from fellow LBQ+ women below.

Misconceptions

Some respondents reported that outdated stereotypes or misconceptions were a barrier to standing for office. As one respondent described:

Candidates are often more favoured if they have a traditional family, LGBTIQ candidates are only sought out for inner city seats.

The reality is many LBQ+ candidates stand for - and are elected to - suburban, regional and rural constituencies. However, those who stood in these areas felt they needed to campaign harder and longer to change minds. Moreover, the heteronormative society in which we all live means that LBQ+ women and their families often struggle to fit in or to be seen as ‘normal’ in the eyes of electors - not that there’s anything wrong with being different!

Respondents that stood for office felt that they were taken less seriously because of their gender and, for younger candidates, because of their age. This included not being taken seriously by the public and by their political rivals. Some younger candidates felt that they were perceived to be inexperienced.

Some respondents felt that there was an undue focus on their appearance. This could include physical appearance - make-up and dress - as well as tone of voice. There is a seeming pressure on LBQ+ women to accord with traditional notions of femininity in terms of speech and appearance. This also extended to concerns about the appearance of their families. Some respondents felt that they would be criticised if they did not have a ‘traditional’ family and male partner.

Trans respondents felt that being visibly trans would be a barrier to standing for political office, in part because of outdated and bigoted views within the public. Asexual respondents felt that they would be perceived as frigid or in need of ‘cure’.

Many of these concerns stem from outdated stereotypes that, unfortunately, still persist.

Motivations for standing

What motivated LBQ+ women respondents to stand or consider standing was highly personalised, yet five common themes emerged. While these motivators may be shared by many heterosexual women, the need for more diversity and representation was a constant throughout.

As with barriers, the list of motivators is far from exhaustive and reflects only the most prevalent themes. Reading through the barriers, it is important to remember that standing for public office can also be an enriching and positive experience. As one respondent who had stood for office concluded:

It was a wonderful learning experience and I believe there should be a lot more LGBTIQ folk putting themselves out there as I found it was greatly appreciated by the community.

Need for diversity

Many respondents were motivated to stand in order to ensure that there was a diversity of voices in our parliaments and our councils where the big decisions are often made.

Many stood to represent their communities, including marginalised groups who might not be represented in the current composition of our parliaments and councils, or to create visibility and a voice for - especially young - women and LBQ+ people. There was a strong “desire to see more people like me in political office.” This was particularly so if respondents felt that current elected representatives did not represent them or their values.

Having said that, respondents were more likely to stand if the area they lived in or the parliament or council they were standing for had a history of accepting diversity and being an environment in which being LBQ+ or a woman is respected and not cast in a negative light. Unsafe political environments with rampant inequality, misogyny and discrimination were a major disincentive. For some, they wished there was less emphasis on candidates’ gender or sexual orientation in election campaigns.

It was consistently felt, however, that more LBQ+ women in public office would lead to a reduction in everyday sexism and misogyny towards future candidates and office-holders. Elected LBQ+ women were seen as potential role models for change. We believe that vocal allies can also make a difference, especially when they are championing our priorities in elected office.

Desire for change

Many respondents expressed a desire to stand so that they could be in a position of power from which they could enact positive changes on issues of importance to them. Many also wanted to contribute to making a difference to their community. Respondents that were passionate about particular causes were motivated to stand in order to advocate on and tackle these issues and achieve practical improvements. This was particularly so for LBQ+ women who were active in their local or queer community or involved in social services.

One respondent summed this up as:

The strong conviction that my voice can make a difference at this critical time, grounded in the strength of the communities I'm a part of.

Some respondents stood in order to encourage, support and empower others to participate in decision-making and, through that, make change. Others were motivated to stand in order to serve their local community. What is consistently clear is that most respondents have to find a *need* to stand and meaningful issues that motivate them to do so. This will form the platform of their campaign. But it is also crucial for LBQ+ women to feel that, if they stand, their voices will be heard. Like heterosexual women, LBQ+ women generally stand for causes and community.

Encouragement

A common story amongst those respondents who had stood for public office was that they had been encouraged or asked to stand by somebody they knew and trusted. As one respondent said:

A friend tapped me on the shoulder and said I would be a good candidate. It was something I had thought about before but I don't think I would have run for a very long time if I wasn't prompted.

This was particularly so if the respondent had a history of positive involvement in and familiarity with party political campaigns, but some respondents were encouraged to stand by people with substantially different politics than theirs. Some were not “political animals” and were instead motivated more by their own or their community’s concerns.

For many respondents, knowing somebody who had stood for or been elected to public office motivated them to stand because, through speaking to that person, they were able to get better insight into the reality of standing for public office. For some respondents, it took them some time to get used to the idea of standing, so the more people that encouraged them, the more likely they were to stand.

As discussed above, formal mentoring and skill-sharing programs are one way through which to cultivate and encourage LBQ+ women to stand. Support is crucial to motivating LBQ+ women to stand. Respondents told us they needed a support network to back them up. This isn’t just support from political colleagues and allies, but support from the local community and from other LBQ+ women. One respondent told us:

I got amazing support from fellow LGBTQIA+ members of my community, a lot that I had never met before, because I am an out bi/pan candidate. I was really touched that they were willing to letterbox and volunteer for me just because they wanted a councillor that "got it".

All of us involved in political and community activism, especially those of us who are LBQ+, can play a role in encouraging LBQ+ women to stand for office.

Interestingly, adverse experiences, such as the negativity around the Australian marriage law postal survey and attacks on LBQ+ and women’s rights, sometimes acted as encouragement to stand for public office. Many respondents were up for the fight and these adverse experiences motivated them to stand for change!

The status quo

Many respondents stood for office in order to challenge the predominantly old, white, heterosexual male status quo in our parliaments and councils. When they did stand, LBQ+ women candidates were able to provide an alternative voice to the status quo. However, it is tough. As one respondent described:

Being a woman is often hard enough, as your personal and sexual life is weaponised. Being a queer woman makes the bar even harder to jump. Even queer activist groups within major political parties have been programmed to campaign for straight candidates who support queer issues. We've never been told we could be a leader, and our own internalised feelings of self hatred can play into that view that we're not worthy of a position. You will see there is a new contingent of conservative, privileged gay men who have made it into politics. Unfortunately this will do nothing to break the rainbow ceiling for queer women.

Some respondents were motivated to stand in order to challenge the policy agendas being implemented by their elected representatives, especially if these policies were seen as lacking evidence, inadequate or detrimental to some degree. Some stood because they regarded the current elected representatives or other candidates as unsatisfactory or taking them and their community and constituents for granted. One respondent was motivated to stand by a “feeling I had something to offer that others couldn’t provide.”

If successive elections did not lead to change, then LBQ+ women were more motivated to stand, especially if they felt they could do a better job. As one respondent surmised:

Things need to change and if the people in power don't do it, then we have to.

Capacity to contribute

Some respondents saw an opportunity to stand for office and took it. Some respondents stood to use their unique skills, experiences and competencies to make a positive difference, particularly if they had transferable skills from their work in other sectors. If they felt they couldn't make change by working elsewhere, respondents were likely to consider standing for public office.

If respondents had a thorough understanding of politics and campaigning know-how, they were more likely to stand. Some respondents stood in order to support another political candidate on a ticket, or to support the party with which they were aligned by promulgating its policies in their local area.

Interestingly, the predominantly online nature of the 2020 Victorian local government elections due to the COVID pandemic made it easier for some to stand. We can only speculate as to why, but it could be because having less need or opportunity to be in public space was less confronting and reduced the risk of personal attacks. It could also be because the more flexible working options instituted during the pandemic gave workers more time and opportunity to stand.

For many respondents, they stood because they were secure enough in their personal life and had the time and connections to do so. Respondents with children felt more comfortable standing when their children were older. Some stood because they wanted a change in career or because they were retiring. Others stood because they felt a sense of belonging in their community and this fuelled their desire to stand.

Respondents were more likely to stand if they had a clear sense of self and what they could contribute in public office. There is a role for others to play in fostering that confidence and sense of self.

Recommendations

If we want to continue to grow the number of LBQ+ women elected to public office, then we need a comprehensive effort to address the issues that perpetuate the underrepresentation of LBQ+ women in political office.

Community organisations, local councils and their peak bodies, political parties and government can take immediate steps to tackle some of the barriers, and capitalise on some of the motivators, to inspire and support more LBQ+ women to stand for office.

Mentorship and representation

- Creating a mentorship program for LBQ+ women that connects current or prospective candidates with an LBQ+ woman in public office or former candidates who can share advice and experiences.
- Encouraging more LBQ+ women to volunteer on campaigns or gain other political experience that places them on a path to stand for office.
- Setting quotas or targets for the number of LBQ+ women candidates and elected representatives by political parties.

Training and support

- Developing and promoting more LBQ+ women-focussed candidate training programs that address key issues of concern, including countering anti-LBQ+ and sexist campaign tactics.
- Implementing more proactively inclusive policies, such as childcare for candidates and elected representatives.
- Developing policies to deal with anti-LBQ+ attacks on candidates.

Networking and skill-sharing

- Building an apolitical, online network of LBQ+ women candidates and elected officials where they can share advice and experiences.
- Providing opportunities and spaces for LBQ+ women to gather and network.
- Developing guidance and training on running effective campaigns that are tailored to LBQ+ women.

Research

- Conducting further research on the experiences and stories of LBQ+ women standing for public office to inform future strategies.
- Collecting data on and promoting legislation and policies to address threatening behaviour against LBQ+ women who stand for public office.
- Developing case studies of where organisations (in Australia or internationally) have fostered and encouraged LBQ+ women to stand for public office and supported them once elected.

Encouragement

- Launching specific campaigns to encourage LBQ+ women to stand for office and urging influencers to tell LBQ+ women they know to stand.
- Creating political material and collateral that features positive images of LBQ+ women and families.
- Actively identifying and recruiting LBQ+ women to stand.