

The Disturbing Inequality of Being Older and LGBTI

[Blog](#), [Inclusion and Equality](#), [Intersectionality](#)

Many older LGBTI's remain invisible to other elderly people, while suffering ageism within their own LGBTI communities and legal and socio-economic barriers in their countries. To mark International Day of Older Persons on October 1, we look at the worrying obstacles LGBTI people may face as they age in Europe, even in countries where LGBTI rights are ensured.

If we are lucky to live long enough, we all get older. But ageing does not affect everyone in our societies equally. LGBTI people are at greater risk of socioeconomic exclusion and lack of social protection as they grow into old age, while having specific and often overlooked needs related to health and long-term care.

On one hand, older LGBTI people can be victims of ageism within their own LGBTI communities. Ageism often desexualizes older people. As a result, it is difficult for some to acknowledge that older people have diverse sexual orientations. On the other hand, many older LGBTI people face discrimination from and remain invisible to other elderly people. Older people's organisations frequently lack awareness of the specific needs of older LGBTI people and often fail to address their needs.

Therefore, older LGBTI people may live in uncertainty. A major source of insecurity for them is the lack of legal and social recognition of same-sex relationships or one's legal gender, affecting their economic security and leading to social isolation.

Barriers for older same-sex couples

Currently there are 12 EU countries that do not recognise same-sex marriage, and in six EU countries same-sex couples cannot access either marriage or registered partnerships, leaving them without any legal recognition of their relationships. Property inheritance, insurance, tax inequality, and lower or denied entitlement to pensions are some of the issues same-sex couples may face across the EU. While there are no empirical data on the situation of older LGBTI people in Central Asia, they are extremely invisible across the region, many leading heteronormative lives due to stigmatisation in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and criminalisation in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where consensual same-sex relations between men are forbidden.

Those same-sex couples residing in countries where their partnership is legally recognised do not have automatic access to the pensions and social benefits of their partners. Some countries that recently adopted marriage equality or registered partnerships have no retroactive recognition of same-sex couples' existence, which has repercussions on their protection. Also, there's a lack of cross-border social security coverage in EU countries where same-sex couples are not legally recognised.

This impact on access to social protection and financial security becomes particularly worrying when people get older and cannot ensure that their partner will have access to their pensions and assets. As a result, same-sex couples must often put in place specific and costly legal arrangements to try to ensure that financial decision-making and inheritance will pass to the surviving partner. Unfortunately, many are not aware that they need to make those arrangements or lack financial resources and the expertise to do so. In some cases, surviving partners can end up losing their homes to hostile relatives.

Obstacles for older trans people

In two EU countries trans people do not have access to any legal gender recognition procedures at all. In 10 EU countries legal gender recognition can be possible on condition of divorce and in six EU countries this access is possible on condition of sterilisation, which has an unavoidable impact in the recognition of trans people's families.

In two Central Asian countries legal gender recognition is possible but extremely difficult to obtain, and sterilization is required in one of them. In three other Central Asian countries while it is possible to change gender markers on identity cards, there are still no by-laws and procedures allowing legal gender recognition.

Trans people struggle to access existing pensions after legally changing their gender, particularly if they have done so at a late stage in their career, due to non-recognition of pension contributions or years spent working under their former name. Many trans people were forced to work informally due to severe social and labour market discrimination and therefore will have difficulties to rely on pension income. In countries where trans-specific healthcare is not covered by health insurance, trans people spend a lot on their own healthcare, thereby negatively impacting their socioeconomic situation.

Difficulties for older intersex people

According to the LGBTI Survey II of the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, 52% of intersex respondents stated that they have difficulty "making ends meet", and 29% of intersex respondents indicated that they have had some kind of housing difficulty in their lifetime. They are more likely to experience resource issues as they age.

Intersex people have also had to endure a lifetime of traumatic and intrusive medical experiences, due to intersex genital mutilation and the consequent physical and mental health implications. This increases healthcare costs throughout their lifetime, and also impacts on their security when faced with having to live in care homes, which could be retraumatizing.

Risks of social isolation

Many older LGBTI people lost their family networks after coming out. Many did not desire children or were unable to have children. Many lived through the AIDS crisis, during which time they lost relatives, friends, and partners. Hence, they may not have the same social connections and support as other older people.

Due to a lifetime of discrimination in multiple sectors, including healthcare, many older LGBTI people face insecurity when seeking healthcare as they get older, and in particular feel insecure about the social environment in institutional settings such as care homes. Even when this is not the case, older LGBTI people without children are likely to feel left out when others in care homes discuss their children and grandchildren.

According to the 2020 AGE barometer, a large proportion of older LGBTI people are at a higher risk of isolation and poverty. A recent UK study reports that 40% of LGBT people aged 50+ are living alone. Especially during Covid-19, where physical distancing and lockdown measures have stopped the activity of several clubs and charities, people relying on those alternative social networks find themselves at higher risk of isolation.