# The Art of Inclusion Diversity Council Australia logoTranscript

## Season 2 - Episode 2 - When Love Hurts

## *Domestic Violence through an LGBTIQ+ Lens*

### Veronica Eulate

There were no longer any words that I could use to fight back to stop it, and like I said, because I wasn't actually scared of her, because I never believed she was going to kill me, I did end up resorting to fighting back. It became the only language I could use to stop her behaviour, or at least to meet her in a place where she then would pay attention to me.

### Andrew Maxwell

That's DCA team member Veronica Eulate talking about a violent past relationship. Veronica is not alone in her experience. Domestic violence prevention organisation Our Watch reports that one in six Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence at the hand of a current or former partner. But these statistics often play out in the context of straight heterosexual relationships. Veronica's situation represents a deeper story, that of intimate partner violence in same sex and LGBTIQ+ relationships.

The issue is not widely reported and it's taboo. That's because the right to recognise LGBTIQ+ relationships was so hard won in Australia and heteronormative attitudes are the default. So it's difficult for members of the community to stand up and say, "We need to talk about domestic violence."

I'm Andrew Maxwell, and I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land, to the elders, past, present, and emerging, on whose country this recording is taking place. This is The Art of Inclusion, a podcast from Diversity Council Australia, or DCA. In our second series, we peer into the lives of fascinating people whose individual stories create the tapestry of diversity that make up Australia and its workplaces. We hand back now to our storyteller Veronica and her moving, impacting recollection of the violence that marked her relationship. Please note this could be distressing for some listeners.

### Veronica Eulate

I was still on a student visa at the time I met my then partner, and we entered into a relationship really quickly. She was my first Australian girlfriend and we were together for just over three and a half years. And the first year was magical as it always tends to be, and then we started to have a lot of arguments and the arguments escalated quite quickly. The arguments would move very quickly into physical aggression, and at that time we were in our mid 20s living a very queer young women's lifestyle on the Inner West of Sydney. And so we were going out drinking a lot, and often alcohol was a part of the mix. So the arguments would get quite major quite fast and she would just physically attack me. She would try and strangle me. She would punch me. She would push me.

### Andrew Maxwell

With the benefit of hindsight, it's easy for Veronica to understand the true nature of domestic violence, but in the moment things were more complex, and not as apparent.

### Veronica Eulate

I didn't know that it was DV at the time. It was just a very intense relationship. It was passionate. I was very much in love, and I believed that she loved me a lot, too. So it didn't really make a whole lot of sense at the time. I was also much younger and I wasn't very well versed in the sort of health and wellbeing resources that were out there. So even when it was happening and even when it had ended still to this day don't feel like what was happening at the time.

### Andrew Maxwell

The reason why Veronica missed the initial signs is perhaps what's unique about violence in same sex relationships.

### Veronica Eulate

One of the things that really complicates domestic violence within same gendered relationships is a lack of understanding about how power dynamics work within genders that are seemingly equal and so I never viewed her as somebody who was unsafe. I never viewed her as somebody who I was scared of. I never feared for my life, because she wasn't bigger than me. There wasn't that sort of a heteronormative understanding of a gender power dynamic like between a man and a woman. So I never conceived of her as a perpetrator necessarily. I actually just saw it as we were two people of the same equal status who just could not make things work right.

### Andrew Maxwell

In this situation, the understanding of simplistic concepts such as victim and perpetrator became confused.

### Veronica Eulate

In our situation with my ex-partner who had begun, she started the violence. It was fairly consistent that she was the one who was perpetrating it on a semi-regular basis. Because I never believed she was going to kill me, I did end up resorting to fighting back. It became the only language I could use to stop her behaviour, or at least to meet her in a place where she then would pay attention to me.

### Andrew Maxwell

This retaliation marked a point of no return and the end of their relationship. When it came to seeking help, Veronica struggled.

### Veronica Eulate

I was probably drinking a lot to cope with it. I was definitely not speaking about it. It was just not something that I felt that I could speak about. I didn't feel like anybody could understand it.

### Andrew Maxwell

Veronica didn't feel included by mainstream domestic violence services or by the types of campaigns these services and other prevention organisations use in the media.

### Veronica Eulate

I wouldn't say I'm an expert in what all of the imagery looks like, but I can only imagine that it might be some of the more traditional ideas of what a heteronormative relationship might look like, and that will absolutely exclude people of diverse genders and sexualities. They will not read themselves in it. I wouldn't read myself in anything like that. In fact, I wouldn't see myself as being allowed to access that service. I would probably seek out the service of somewhere else that specifically had imagery of my people.

### Andrew Maxwell

The workplace, though it presented an opportunity, was also a challenging place to raise the issue.

### Veronica Eulate

I was working ironically for the largest health and wellbeing organisation for LGBTQ people, and I remember a range of conversations and coming out about DV and that being a big issue for communities. And I remember reading it and thinking, "I think that's what happened to me, but I'm not really 100% sure." But I started to feel, find solace, I guess, in knowing that actually maybe I was the one of the three that they say experiences that and that I wasn't alone in it.

I'd still never felt that I could speak about it. I've never really spoken that much about it. This would be the first time I've ever spoke this publicly. I didn't at the time know how to have a conversation in the workplace about it. I didn't know that it was necessarily relevant because we were working at the service of the community and even though I was a member of the community, it didn't feel as if it was about me. It was about everybody else. So I do believe I would have received support had I opened up about it, but I just didn't know how.

### Andrew Maxwell

Kai Noonan is the Associate Director of Health Programmes and Development at LGBTIQ+ Health Awareness Organisation, ACON. She's also managed ACON's domestic and family violence projects and she understands Veronica's struggle to identify, articulate, and communicate the problems in her relationship.

### Kai Noonan

And I think that there's some very understandable reasons for that. For example, a lot of people in the community don't want to further pathologist our relationships. So the marriage equality debate was only two years ago or not even two years ago, and we saw through that time, through that really tough time that our community went through that we had to defend our relationships. We had to prove to Australia that our relationships are just as good as everybody else's.

So at a time like that, when we're still healing from that, it's going to be very difficult to come out and actually say, "Well, you know those relationships that we fought so hard to be recognised. Well, actually some of those are abusive." So we do have those extra barriers.

### Andrew Maxwell

While organisations like Our Watch report mainstream domestic violence statistics, similarly, Kai says specific data is beginning to paint a picture within the LGBTIQ+ community.

### Kai Noonan

And what the data is suggesting is that LGBTIQ people, well, particularly for gay men and lesbian couples, we know that intimate partner violence happens at roughly the same rates as what heterosexual cisgender women are facing. We know that for bisexual women, they're at a greater risk of violence even than heterosexual cisgender women, and for trans and gender diverse people that rate is much higher.

Again, the research is somewhat limited around trans and gender diverse people's experience of violence, but the research that is out there suggests that anywhere between 50 and 80% of trans and gender diverse people have experienced intimate partner violence. So yes, it is a comparatively smaller amount of data that is out there, but it is out there.

### Andrew Maxwell

These numbers are driven by two factors, common to all violent relationships: power and control. But there are differences in how that power and control plays out in LGBTIQ+ relationships.

### Kai Noonan

So for example, an abuser might use their partner or family member's gender or sexuality against them. They might threaten to out them about their gender history or their sexuality. They might say to, for example, a trans partner, "Well, family court will never allow you to have your children because you're trans," or they might prevent a trans or gender diverse partner from taking hormones or seeking hormone therapy, for example, or transition related medications.

So there are ways that it can play out a little bit differently in LGBTIQ relationships, but I also think that one of the main differences is that we know that LGBTIQ people are talking about the violence they experience much less than people in the general population. They're accessing services less. They're reporting to police less. And we also know that there are services or there are far less services that will actually take LGBTIQ people. So for example, there aren't domestic violence services for male victims, particularly men with children. There are a lot of services that will exclude trans and gender diverse people from their service, and a lot of services also have exemptions from the Anti-Discrimination Act, which means that they can refuse to service LGBTIQ people because of their identity.

### Andrew Maxwell

Exacerbating these barriers is the tense relationship many members of the community have had with medical providers and police.

### Kai Noonan

Historically, LGBTIQ people have felt unsafe with police and have felt unsafe and misunderstood with their general practitioners and other healthcare providers as well. So already there is that tense history already. There is that reluctance to go to them for help and support.

### Andrew Maxwell

Another barrier is a lack of awareness of specialist services that do exist.

### Kai Noonan

So it's about not knowing where to go for formal support. A lot of LGBTIQ people have less informal support networks. A lot of us don't have the same relationships with family, for example, as non-LGBTIQ people, so we have less informal support services as well. We're also a smaller community. We have fears around anonymity, confidentiality, people in the community knowing. These are just some of the barriers that we're facing to accessing support and to coming out about the violence happening in our relationships.

### Andrew Maxwell

Given this reluctance to access social services, workplaces can fill a gap.

### Kai Noonan

Workplaces can be hugely influential from the prevention through to the intervention through to support and recovery. Many workplaces are introducing or have introduced a domestic and family violence policy. I think it is very important to name LGBTIQ people and to name our relationships. If we don't see ourselves explicitly acknowledged, then we assume that a policy is not for us. So absolutely I think that a policy should acknowledge the gendered nature of violence, but should also acknowledge that particularly for LGBTIQ people, our relationships sit outside of that kind of heteronormative assumption of how relationships work.

### Andrew Maxwell

Kai has specific advice for managers who want to support victims of intimate partner abuse.

### Kai Noonan

Well, there's two things. One, if you're already recognising that perhaps an employee is showing up late, their work performance is slipping, perhaps a colleague has overheard some distressing conversations on the phone to their family member or partner, these are some of the signs that they might be experiencing abuse. And again, the first thing is take them to a safe place and just say to them, "Hey, I'm noticing X, Y, and Z and I'm worried about you." Offer them support. Give them the number for EAP or even better, a domestic violence specialist counsellor and say to them, "I'm worried about you. These are some support options. Even if you're not ready to talk about it now, know that I'm here. Know that we can try to as best as possible keep you safe in this workplace."

It may take somebody experiencing violence a long time to come out about their violence. It may take them a long time to really recognise it, name it, seek support, but make sure you plant that seed. You tell them expressly that you're a safe person and that you are there to help them when they are ready. You can't force somebody to talk about abuse, and in fact, then you would just be doing or mimicking similar behaviours that the perpetrator is. So it's about giving them freedom, space, and information, showing them that there is support out there.

But before you get to that stage, I highly recommend that you get all of your employees on board. You get the board onboard and you start to implement some strategies and put some safety strategies in place so that you're prepared for when, not if, but when one of your employees is experiencing abuse. And start now so that you don't have to backtrack, so that you don't have to scramble and look for a way to keep your employee safe so that you're ready when that happens.

### Andrew Maxwell

Back to our storyteller, Veronica, she has advice for anyone in the LGBTIQ+ community who might be suffering domestic violence.

### Veronica Eulate

We've become much more sophisticated in the way that we understand the health and well-being needs of LGBTQI+ people, and I would suggest for people to not try and not be as afraid to speak to somebody even if it's a friend or a family member. There are a lot of services out there now, and I would also probably encourage people to try and work through the shame that comes through it. And because it's so normal and I still feel a whole lot of shame even talking about it. It's still very quite challenging at times as you can hear.

### Andrew Maxwell

For Veronica, as a survivor it comes down to finding strength in vulnerability.

### Veronica Eulate

I think it's something about not being able to see your own self within the context of a well-being issue. It's almost like if you see yourself as an empowered, strong, intelligent, assertive person in the world, it can be difficult to, I suppose, admit that you are actually quite vulnerable to a range of power structures or dynamics out there that you're not really aware of that are actually yet that are affecting you. So there is a bit of that sort of self-awareness.

### Andrew Maxwell

The Art of Inclusion is a podcast from Diversity Council Australia. Andrea Maltman Rivera and Sam Loy are the producers and Lisa Annese is the executive producer. This episode included contributions from Veronica Eulate and Kathy Brown.

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