

Growing Old and Being LGBTIQ in Malta: What Happens When We Need Care?

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Keywords: LGBTIQ+ ageing, long-term care, minority stress, heteronormativity, self-actualisation

The present abstract explores the lived experiences of older lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals in Malta, focusing on the intersection of ageing, care needs, and systemic disparities. Despite Malta's highly progressive legislative landscape—ranking first on the Rainbow Europe Map for ten consecutive years with an 91% score in 2025—older LGBTIQ+ adults continue to navigate significant social and healthcare challenges stemming from a historical context of bias, discrimination, and marginalisation. Utilising a 2019 local study, this research identifies key disparities in social and healthcare support services and details the narratives of older lesbian and gay (LG) persons.

Four primary themes emerged regarding the experiences of older LG individuals in Malta. The first theme, "Successful queer ageing vs. heteronormativity," highlights the resilience of older adults who have historically faced severe minority stress, including suicidal ideation driven by societal prejudice and rumours. For these individuals, successful ageing relies heavily on maintaining self-sufficiency, nurturing close friendships, leading active lifestyles through sports or volunteering, and prioritising physical health. The second theme, "Finding your own kind," emphasises the critical role of chosen families and robust social support networks, where partners often serve as the primary source of assistance.

The third theme, "The need of visibility," addresses the "triple jeopardy" faced by this demographic, including issues like poverty among single older adults. Within healthcare and support services, older LG individuals frequently encounter insensitive policies and heteronormative assumptions; for example, participants reported being restricted to same-sex carers regardless of their actual sexual orientation. Furthermore, active engagement within the local LGBT community is sometimes limited by Malta's small geographic size and a fragmented social scene.

Crucially, the fourth theme explores an impending conflict for older adults: "Future: Sacrificing one's identity vs. self-actualisation". Participants expressed profound anxiety regarding the prospect of entering long-term care (LTC) facilities or old people's homes. Many strongly prefer "ageing in place," taking proactive steps such as retrofitting their homes to maintain independence and avoid institutionalisation. The fear of moving to an LTC facility is largely driven by the prospect of living alongside unaccepting peers, losing the freedom to openly share their authentic life stories, and facing "risky visibility". Consequently, there is a prominent demand for LGBTIQ-affirmative care homes or dedicated spaces within existing facilities where residents can live happily and authentically without fear of scrutiny.

The challenges within LTC environments are multifaceted and pronounced. Institutional barriers include a widespread lack of staff knowledge regarding LGBTIQ+ needs, assumptions of heterosexuality, and "out of sight, out of mind" attitudes where staff falsely assume they have no LGBTIQ+ residents. These environments often lack privacy and foster prejudice, creating barriers to sexual expression and forcing many older adults to re-enter the closet or de-transition. Pressures to present as heterosexual or cisgender frequently result in gay and lesbian couples presenting themselves as siblings or close friends. The consequences of this forced invisibility are severe, correlating with increased risks of depression, accelerated dementia symptoms, and early mortality. Reports of mistreatment, including abuse, neglect, admission refusals, and the separation of same-sex couples, further exacerbate the social isolation experienced by this community.

To mitigate these systemic failures, LTC facilities must eliminate barriers to sexual expression and adopt proactive, person-centred care that recognises the unique cultural histories of LGBTIQ+ older adults. Recommendations include updating organisational policies to include sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) language, providing ongoing training for all staff and management, ensuring residents remain connected to the LGBTIQ+ community, and displaying LGBT-welcoming symbols to promote representation. In Malta, integrating these affirmative practices aligns with existing national frameworks such as the National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing, the National Dementia Strategy, and the LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy & Action Plan 2023-2027. Ultimately, fostering an environment of trust is essential to ensure that older LGBTIQ+ individuals can live safely and authentically in their later years.