

## CHAPTER 4

### OLDER GAY MEN AND ACTIVE AGEING: UNPACKING NARRATIVES

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#### Introduction

This chapter illuminates the experiences of gay men living in Malta who are a marginalised community within the ageing population. There is a growing area of empirical evidence that highlights the unique perspectives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) older people. As a result of historical, social and cultural contexts the ageing LGBT community have, until relatively recently, tended to be wholly invisible in gerontological and geriatric research (Giunta & Rowan, 2015; Harley & Teaster, 2016). The research evidence demonstrates that the intersection of multiple identities in LGBT ageing are combined with risk factors which include significant health disparities, heightened exposure to discrimination and victimisation and the fear of and potential challenges in accessing culturally responsive environments (Higgins et al., 2011; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018). Despite these adversities, LGBT older people have shown remarkable resilience and strengths which can be harnessed when engaging in discourses of active ageing (Hash & Rogers, 2013; Vella, 2013). Substantial achievements in legislative and human rights within many states in Europe and the increasing visibility of LGBT older people have certainly softened attitudes and promoted their recognition. However, the life stories, relationships and culture of older LGBT people can often be overlooked by those with responsibilities for promoting wellbeing in later life and providing direct support. The use of narrative and biographical approaches to inquiry within research with LGBT older people can provide a useful tool for engaging with these experiences, and for meaning-making to try to understand in greater depth the complexities and cultural experiences of growing old, so that strategies can be developed at all different levels and for different communities (Ray et al., 2008). Within gerontology, for example, narratives are used as direct agents for achieving social change by drawing on humanistic and critical studies of ageing.

The study reported herein drew on a biographical narrative approach to explore the experiences of five older gay men living in Malta aged 45-60 years old and in particular how they negotiated their sexual identity and exercised agency in their relationships with others. This approach is particularly relevant because it can be woven into public policy, as it responds to issues of ageing faced at a societal level (Clark, 2011). Research into lived experience of individuals facilitates our understanding of both the inner and the outer worlds of “historically-evolving persons-in-historically-evolving situations” (Wengraf, 2001 : 1). A narrative approach to researching with older gay men can provide a structure for exploring the stories and sub-stories in relation to Maltese and broader policy discourse and for identifying a better foundation for practice. This chapter reviews the broader literature for clarification of who LGBT older people are and how their sexual and gender minority status influences social relationships from an interdisciplinary perspective. It captures some key demographic and epidemiological factors contributing to LGBT ageing experiences including those specific to the Maltese context. This public picture enables us to move to the private realm of ageing in the gay community as seen through the five individuals who participated in this study. The chapter concludes by proposing

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a number of recommendations for policies, principles and practices which have the potential to engender a more inclusive approach to active ageing in Malta.

### **Context for LGBT ageing**

The World Health Organisation (2015) estimated that between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world's population over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22%. With no census count available of LGBT older adults in different world regions, researchers have used various methods to estimate the size of the population. For example, one study estimates that there are over 2.4 million LGBT adults over age 50 in the United States of America, a number which is expected to reach over 5 million by 2030. In Malta, the Malta Gay Rights Movement estimates that approximately 6-7% of the general Maltese population is gay (Grech, 2011). Without national probability samples, accurate characterisation of this population has been difficult. Yet, many community-based, non-probability studies, provided invaluable insight into the experiences of LGBT elders, and clearly demonstrated that LGBT older peoples face unique challenges to ageing that their heterosexual, cisgender peers do not (Choi & Meyer, 2016).

There is a lack of comparable data on the respect, protection and fulfilment of the fundamental rights of LGBT persons globally and in Europe. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012) online surveys of LGBT persons' experiences in European countries provided valuable evidence of how they experience bias-motivated discrimination, violence and harassment in different areas of life and in relation to the obstacles faced in enjoying their fundamental rights. Of those LGBT respondents from European Union (EU) Member States who completed the online survey, 62% (57,488 people) were gay men from which just 6% (3182 people) were over 55 years (ibid.). Seventy-seven LGBT people completed the survey from Malta of whom 43 were gay men. More than a quarter (27%) of all LGBT EU respondents, aged 55-plus, reported having experienced discrimination and harassment in the past 12 months in the country where they lived. In Malta, 35% of respondents felt discriminated against in the previous 12 months in areas other than employment which they attributed to their sexual identity status. Gay men particularly reported feeling discriminated against by healthcare (9%) or social service (7%) personnel and these survey results bear out a link between openness and negative experiences when using or trying to access services as an LGBT person. Twenty-nine per cent of LGBT people in Malta who responded to the survey also reported that they have never been open about being LGBT at work in the last five years. This is invariably in conflict with the freedom to express one's identity in social life, a minimum requirement for equal participation in society. Across the LGBT EU survey respondents, gay men were much more likely than either lesbian women or bisexual respondents to experience in their country of residence, widespread discrimination because of being from the LGBT community. Furthermore, gay men respondents were the most likely of all the LGBT groups to avoid certain locations or places for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed because of being gay. Seventy-three per cent of respondents in Malta reported that positive measures to promote respect for the human rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual people were 'fairly rare' or 'very rare', and this increased to 81% for the human rights of transgender people. Many have also been victims of violence and harassment in public places with a poor response from the police; casual jokes and offensive language about LGBT people in everyday life. Finally, those respondents able to be more open about their identities gave more positive responses including life satisfaction. Whilst just a snapshot into LGBT lives across the EU, at national level, policy makers can use the survey findings to further develop, implement and

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monitor the impact of relevant policies and by adopting specific LGBT action plans or integrated these issues in national human rights.

For older people, the research demonstrates that LGBT individuals are more likely to avoid accessing care or conceal their sexual and gender identity from providers for fear of reprisals (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018). They have fewer options for informal care given they are twice as likely to live alone, two times less likely to be partnered, and much less likely to have children. Most professed to rely more on ‘families of choice’ (composed of close friends), LGBT community organizations, and affirmative religious groups for care and support needs (Cannon, Shukla & Vanderbilt, 2017). Financial instability and legal issues were major concerns among LGBT older people. They may experience higher risks of mental health issues that include poor body image (McParland & Camic, 2016), higher rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders (King et al., 2008) - all of which are associated with experiences of victimization and stigma. Henderson and Almack (2017) argued that LGBT individuals are likely to have higher incidences of life-limiting and life-threatening disease attributed to risk behaviours, such as smoking or alcohol abuse and are disproportionately at risk for sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS, in addition to body weight problems, and certain cancers (Driscoll & Gray, 2017). Finally, ‘coming out’ or ‘being out’ for LGBT older people in relation to how, where and when they like to be asked about their sexual orientation and cultural identities needs to be appreciated through an understanding of the political history and positioning of different groups of older people. Looking at the history, you can understand why some LGBT older people may be political about their identity and others prefer not to be. For example, the misassociation of sexual identities with mental illness; criminality and having to conform with heteronormative lifestyles as well as the experience of gay liberation, activism and positive engagement with the LGBT community all impact on the coming out process (Hafford-Letchfield, 2016).

### **LGBTI policies in Malta**

Over the past decade, the Maltese context has undergone several social changes. The latter emerged as a result of the impact of globalisation, European Union accession in 2004, introduction of Divorce Law in 2011, IVF Bill in 2012, and the discourse of LGBT rights which later evolved into the Civil Unions Act (Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, 2014), Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics (GIGESC) Act (Valenza, 2015), and the banning of harmful gay conversion practices (Vella, 2017). All these were presented and passed as policy measures under the newly elected Labour Government in 2013, provided a more dynamic shift into the lived identities of the Maltese LGBT community. Most importantly, this has somewhat loosened the Church’s (Roman Catholic) grip over the Maltese society which some would argue has hindered the emergence and normalisation of such identities (Sciocluna, 2011).

This dynamic shift in LGBT rights was also echoed on a European level. The ILGA Europe Rainbow Index - a European index representing the advancement in LGBT rights in terms of the legal, political and social systems amongst a total of 49 Council of Europe Member States found Malta, for a second year running, to sustain a first ranking (Vella, 2017). Whilst the gay community seems to have gained greater visibility, nevertheless little is known about those LGBT persons entering later life and much needed policy and practice developments to enable

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a sense of continuity in keeping with the concept of active ageing. The concept of active ageing recognises and enables persons to accomplish their full potential by encompassing the mental, physical and social well-being throughout their life course and to actively participate in society whilst being provided with adequate security, care and protection when deemed necessary (World Health Organisation, n.d.). It is about developing an overall positive approach in meeting its challenges, being fulfilled in one's job, social engagements as well as being more independent in one's daily life and feeling engaged as citizens (European Commission, 2015). The Active Ageing Index 2014, ranked Malta in the 26th, 15th and 17th place, within areas of employment, social participation and independent living respectively amongst 28 EU Member States (UNECE/ European Commission, 2015). In relation to the lack of visibility towards LGBT persons in Malta, the Malta Gay Rights Movement have published a booklet also containing narratives of members of the LGBTIQ community whose ages range from 53 to 73 (Malta Gay Rights Movement, 2015). The stories highlight the struggles which the local LGBT community experience past and present with the aim of creating a platform for discussion for future policy formation. If the academic community is to better understand the ageing process of LGBT persons, it must reach out and listen to their narrative and engage them in the research process (Pugh, 2012).

The research study reported herein focused on LGBT persons aged 45-plus residing in Malta. As stated earlier, the current generation of gay men between the ages of 45 and 60 were born during the post second-world war period, an era which denotes great oppression and active homophobic tendencies and where homosexuality was considered a mental illness this target population, may hide their true identity in order to feel integrated in society and eligible to service provision.

## **Research design**

This chapter reports on the findings of a study conducted by the first author which sought to explore the following query: 'how is sexuality experienced among older gay men in Malta, in the light of the biological, psychological and sociological dynamic processes?' Slevin (2010) suggested that gay men experience an 'accelerated ageing' in relation to heterosexual men, whereby old age comes earlier for gay men due to high commodification of sex within gay culture. Research on LGBT ageing has addressed forms of exclusion - socio-economic (Boxer, 1997), socio-psychological (Quam and Whitford, 1992) and the double invisibility of LGBT individuals on grounds of age combined with sexual and/or gender difference. Simpson (2018) however suggested that this can lack a theoretical focus which relies on a narrow, common sense notion of gay ageing as 'accelerated' in a youth-obsessed culture. Put simply, Simpson (ibid.) asserted that in gay culture, individuals are considered old before their time, and thus, excluded. The qualitative study explored how sexual identity is experienced among older gay men. The lacuna in gerontological research on homosexuality, both in Malta and in other countries has been justified due to various reasons: (i) gerontology being relatively young, (ii) the gay subgroup is particularly difficult to access, especially since the current generation of older gay men are coming from a historical period where homosexuality was highly stigmatised and discriminated upon (Marques & Sousa, 2016). The study functioned to challenged homogenous views about the gay community whose members may differ on a number of grounds, such as that of body type, able-bodiedness, race/ethnicity, social class, religion/belief, and that of age. Its main purpose was to bring out the experiences of older gay men on their

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sexual identity and how this is negotiated between the self in relation to others, and the provision of services.

A Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was selected to collect data through the collection of life stories of older gay men, as told by them. Narrative methodology can be seen as an advocacy tool by getting close to people's stories and lives with the aim of raising awareness and educating others. It allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants' world view and how they make sense of the things that surrounds them:

The autobiographies 'from below'...work to create a different sense of autobiographical form, one where consciousness of self becomes more of a collective exploration than just a private one. The author is somehow located as a member of a class, a gendered group, a generational group, an outcast group. (Plummer, 2001 : 90)

During 2013, five participants shared experiences of their sexuality throughout their lives. As explained in Vasilachis de Gialdino (2009), since human beings are at the centre of any qualitative research, the 'ontological rupture of identity' allows the researcher to bring out what is similar and simultaneously, what is different and unique for each participant. The interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms used to protect the identity of the participants. The constant comparative method was used in the analysis to bring out similarities and differences of the stories told by the participants. The themes which were derived from their narrative included; living a past life in a heteronormative script, establishing a good social support system through means of friendships and being in relationships, loneliness and the legacy they leave behind.

### *The protagonists*

Purposive sampling combined with a snowball sampling helped reach the target population. In the beginning of this research, the first author only knew two gay people fulfilling the sample criteria, but through personal contacts and involvement in non-governmental organisations, was able to extend the sample. Interviewees (all with pseudonyms) included:

**Jason (51 years):** Works within the hospitality industry. Previously married to a woman but currently in a monogamous relationship with a man for the past eight years. He is open about his sexuality with friends, but not with his family.

**Alexander (46 years):** Works within the medical field. He is currently (during time of study) in a monogamous relationship and has been for the past three years. Alexander finds great security in his relationship with his partner and values highly his network of close friends.

**Peter (49 years):** Works within the hospitality industry. Previously married to a woman with whom he has two children. After ending the marriage, he went into a monogamous relationship which lasted for nine years, and later entered the gay scene at the age of thirty-seven (37) years. Today Peter considers himself as a single, 'free' man.

**Edward (60 years):** Retired, and has been commuting from Malta to London to New York ever since his late twenties. During which he has spent a good portion of his life working for

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the British Navy. When living in London, earlier in life he was in a 14 year relationship. After this relationship, he began seeing different men, all of which were much younger than him.

**George (45 years):** Works within the tourism industry, and has been in a monogamous relationship for the past five years. He is open about his sexuality, although he does not feel informed and part of the gay community, and hence, has established his own social circles.

Each profile provided a unique narrative and basic foundation to enabling the researcher to locate them in time and space and by setting the contexts for digging deeper into meaning and understanding of the lived experience, as they are correlated and contrasted.

### **Narratives of ageing**

In order to reach full acceptance, participants struggled throughout much of their lives in order to blend in with the cultural and social norms at the time. However, their struggle was not void of sexual experimentation. Negotiation of the gay identity, does not come packed with ready-made lifestyle patterns (see Foucault, 1978). This is echoed in the participants' narratives and examples. When they were younger, they did not have any role models or life-style patterns which they could adopt to help them express their sexual identity. The negotiation of the gay identity implies the negotiation of several areas of identity among older gay men. Although the respondents did not identify as heterosexual, heteronormative discourse impacted them on an everyday and every night basis:

For me, without knowing, deep down I wanted to be accepted, and being gay was a problem when it came to social inclusion. So at the time, you either got married or you became a priest. (George)

George and Edward underlined that when they were young they were still sexually confused about their sexual identity, and in order to deal with their guilt and suppress these feelings, which they felt were 'wrong', opted for priesthood. Other respondents tried to suppress their sexual inclinations by taking the (heterosexual) marriage route as opted by Peter and Jason who fit Berger's (1982) category of 'previously married gay men'. Respondents in this category tended to be involved in gay affairs while being married. Most participants came to terms with their sexual orientation when they left the Maltese Islands. Countries such as London, where it was accepted to be gay, made them feel more positive about themselves, because in such environments they were able to explore this facet of their identity without the fear of facing social exclusion and social opprobrium.

All respondents underlined that they could not be open about their sexuality with family. As expressed by three of the participants, obtaining a bank loan or donating blood was always bone of contention with the respective institutions. As Peter states that upon disclosing his sexual orientation in both incidents, the reason from the blood bank refusal was "a lot of gay people are very promiscuous" and in the other case of applying for a joint account he was refused this due to "company policy". Such common instances stigmatise homosexuality and tie sexual identity to promiscuity, possibly denoting of inferior health to heterosexual counterparts. In relation to the research referred to earlier regarding the anxiety of LGBT older people about future care needs, mobility and support, having experienced discrimination makes this issue a real concern in particular when accessing health care, social care and GP services.

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The cause of discrimination may be due to the fact that care systems are built around heterosexual needs and do not cater to the needs of the homosexual population (Stonewall, 2011). Being an older gay man embedded within a Maltese context is all about how one makes sense and interprets the social environment by way of expressing their particular wants and needs, as well as the driving forces behind their actions. Securing social support was by means of having a good network of friends, and being in a relationship. In future concerns the doubt and fear of loneliness did manifest by the possible thought of having children and leaving a legacy, played with the participants' overall sense of wellbeing.

### *Social network / friendships*

Having one's own supportive system of friends is seen as a very vital and important aspect of the gay identity when reaching older age. Alexander stated:

I am very lucky to say that I have many gay couples as friends and my social life revolves around them...I feel very comfortable in their circles. I feel that I don't need to go beyond at this point...But obviously it's important to keep in touch with people who understand you, who can share the same views you can joke about the same thing and there is a certain comfort what I would call equated to a brotherhood (Alexander).

Friendship for these gay respondents was seen as a brotherhood, which sustains them and supports their survival (Nardi, 1992). Research demonstrated that a circle of friends functions as a means of social support, and the search towards the satisfaction of their sexual needs has to occur outside this social network (Sarantakos, 1998).

### *Relationships when reaching older age*

All the respondents gave a lot of importance to finding the 'ideal' partner. All participants believed in the importance of a close relationship which was monogamous. Monogamy, in the gay culture, points to a high sense of commitment among the partners (Sarantakos, 1998). Participants reported that this type of relationship is based on trust, respect as well as is a source of security and social well-being especially among those who have reached a more mature age. As Alexander explained:

[The] relationship with my partner is very important and works on that level. Erm so what I am looking is that I am sexually satisfied with my partner and... I find a lot of support from him...although we are two very very different people I can say, and we argue a lot, at the end of the day I can see that genuinely...we love each other and we are a security to each other (Alexander).

Like the general population fewer depressive symptoms and better overall health benefit LGBT couples from being partnered (Goldsen et al, 2017). Challenging matters are feared as their social network starts diminishing which comes at a threat to their own wellbeing and sexual identity (Raws, 2004).

### *Loneliness*

Even though research indicates that in comparison to heterosexual persons, older gay and lesbian people are more likely to be single and living alone (Alzheimer's Society, 2017), without family support structures and adequate support services that heterosexual persons enjoy (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013). Whilst our respondents were in a relationship when the research was conducted, only a few of the participants mentioned loneliness. The respondents were however preoccupied that:

...with homosexuals there is always that little bit of loneliness. There is always that insecurity which is known with homosexuals as is with heterosexuals... Erm but I think with homosexuals even when I talk to people with gay men, they always would say to me ooh you know we are going to finish up all by ourselves (Edward).

With older age, the prevalence of this preoccupation predominates; there is more fear of a diminishing social network of friends and the fear of receiving less support.

### *Legacy*

The idea of not having children, which could have also acted as a means of support especially when reaching older age as well as in terms of bequeath one's wealth did cross the mind of some of the participants who did not have children. In Maltese society, the only socially and sometimes legal way of producing an heir was through heterosexual marriage, a mechanism not feasible to a number of these respondents. As Edward explained:

I am going to die and not having a legacy in the way of a social terms of not leaving an heir to me that would always be a...till the day I die. That being a homosexual I am not going to leave something to carry on my legacy... (Edward)

Some of the respondents however felt that even though they did not have children, they were still leaving a legacy behind them. This legacy however took a different form. Their own experiences of being gay in Malta, even when faced with social opprobrium, made it safer to other Maltese gay individuals to be 'themselves' with themselves and with others. They rendered being gay more acceptable and contributed towards the legal safeguard in Maltese society.

### *The need to contribute within society*

The participants in this research highlighted their desire to mentor younger gay men as a way of making them feel that they are contributing towards society. Participants felt that the younger generation should not go through the same tribulations they went through when they were young and thus they feel obliged to help younger homosexual acquaintances in the form of support and advice in a fatherly/brotherly fashion. They can provide this help because they feel they are more experienced and knowledgeable in this area. The participants feel that by providing this help, they can live vicariously through their protégés' life. The way as to how the gay identity in older age has manifested within the Maltese structure, brings to light the transitioning lifestyle of the personhood, from stories of repression, comes stories of liberation, whereby sexuality is seen to be expressed differently in a more integrated and consolidated manner.



## Discussion and recommendations

This collection of stories highlighted the intersection of sexuality with older age and the emerging narratives provide an image of hope, liberation and a sense of connectedness for older Maltese gay men. As Alexander summarises:

The intersection of sexual identity with age...is a sum of things...[meaning], sexual identity comes from many things...wellbeing, how you feel...if you surround yourself with good friends, if you work in a good environment, if you lived in a good environment. All these would contribute. (Alexander).

After having faced different repressive mechanisms whilst growing up, the participants clearly stated that at this stage in life, they seem to have come to terms with their sexual identity, reflecting upon the fundamental importance social networks have for older gay men. Most notably in playing a crucial role in the provision of support, security and care, which are also factors, which feature, in monogamous relationships, and prove positive to their overall wellbeing.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the gay respondents felt comfortable with their sexual identity, and because of this, they were not liable to feeling depressed and lonely. The respondents had the means - tangible and intangible (wealth, education and social networks) to find alternative secure spaces outside Malta to explore their sexual identity. Not all gay people of their age were in a position to do so though. At the same time, the respondents acknowledged that it was only with time that they learnt how to 'cope' with their sexual identity, even more so when reaching older age. They expressed views that life has taught them coping skills and strategies in order to find alternative ways of care and support, in turn establishing connections through the use of 'wisdom' which they feel obliged to pass on to the younger generation. They also highlighted concerns for the future regarding being left in bitter loneliness and isolation and the potential bypassing of care and support services seem for LGBT people.

Gay identity should not be seen as a private but as a public matter. A lack of openness may hide the potential need in seeking mental and physical needs which may lead to social isolation (Clover, 2006). Participants in this study disclosed the need for Malta to grant equal rights, full citizenship and recognition as a means of their feeling included in society. This was linked to changes in legislation so as to provide safety and security to this population. Inclusivity of housing, social care and other community based provision requires recognition and acceptance of different sexualities, and understanding on the part of service providers which are currently viewed as potentially unsafe by older gay men. Moreover, the distribution of materials found in health centres, which also incorporate different sexuality such that one could relate too, is also a step towards inclusivity making the clinic known that it is welcome to all and there to cater for all (Clover, 2006). An environment empathic and respecting of differences remains crucial to the support from all care services and one which takes a person-centred approach (Pugh, 2012)

This chapter has served in shedding a glimpse through the narratives told of the older gay population living in the Maltese context. Further enquiry is needed into the needs of this seemingly forgotten group alongside the rethinking of care provision. Raising awareness of

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LGBT issues and targeted support that draws on the meaning of their life experience is crucial for active ageing of LGBT older people. The intersection of the gay identity when reaching older age combine several risk factors within biological, psychological and social domains (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018). Resiliency and coping mechanisms need to be harnessed when engaging in active ageing (Hash & Rogers, 2013; Vella, 2013). Recent legislative and human rights measures have contributed in softening the attitudes and in providing recognition of this sub-population, however their overall wellbeing when reaching older age seems to be overlooked. A narrative approach can provide potential routes to advocacy and a structure for exploring stories as well as raising awareness and educating others. This small study drew upon the experiences of how the sexual identity of five gay men was negotiated when reaching older age. With no census on the Maltese LGBT population, more community based studies are needed to develop our knowledge base on the lived experiences of LGBT older persons and their unique challenges alongside their heterosexual counterparts (Choi & Meyer, 2016). Concealing one's identity should no longer be enforced and more recognition and active interventions to prevent discrimination, harassment and active homophobia is required.

Whilst more extensive research is needed as the population grows, we make some recommendations for policy makers and care providers. Firstly, to establish inclusive guidelines or measures in education especially when it comes to providing the tools in training professionals to promote a better understanding of the lives of LGBT persons. Secondly empower older LGBT persons to reach out to support services and in joining various groups which would enhance their overall wellbeing. Additionally, provide capacity building in order for the LGBT groups to become 'age-friendly', and assist older LGBT persons in fostering stronger social networks. And finally, ensuring access and equality in the provision of services towards the LGBT population, which are made visible, especially in the distributed material found in clinics or service centres.

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