

Lesbian group seeks human rights exemption to exclude trans women from Melbourne event



By

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GOT IT

A lesbian community group has applied to the Australian Human Rights Commission for an exemption from anti-discrimination laws to hold an event open only to same-sex attracted, biological women.

The proposed “Lesbians Born Female” event in Melbourne to mark this year’s International Lesbian Day looms as a national test case in the clash between women’s rights and transgender inclusion, with the organisers seeking the right to bar men, straight and bisexual women and transgender women from attending.



Lesbian rights campaigner Carole Ann says it is not transphobic for same-sex attracted women to want a space of their own.

CREDIT:

WAYNE TAYLOR

In its application to the AHRC, the Lesbian Action Group says exclusively lesbian events have been driven underground by a “repressive and conservative political climate” which leaves women who speak out about lesbian rights exposed to abuse and recriminations.

The group is seeking a five-year exemption from the federal Sex Discrimination Act to hold an event at the Victorian Pride Centre in Melbourne on October 15 and future events which would celebrate lesbian culture and allow “like-minded and like-bodied” women to gather. It says the fear of being labelled as transphobic has eroded lesbian rights.

“This current situation is very similar to the discrimination lesbians faced in the 1950s and 1960s when they could be sacked from their jobs, refused accommodation and given shock treatment and therefore, only met in private to protect themselves,” the application states.

“Nowadays, lesbians who publicly speak out about lesbian rights are also sacked from their jobs, ridiculed and threatened with all kinds of abuse; a situation that is untenable and one we want to address with this application for an exemption.”

The management of the Victorian Pride Centre, a community-owned facility built in St Kilda with state, federal and private funding, has not taken a final decision on whether to book the Lesbians Born Female event. Equality Australia and Transgender Victoria, both tenants of the Pride Centre, were approached for comment.



Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews and Victorian Pride Centre chair Hang Vo raise a rainbow flag.

CREDIT:

LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

The newly formed Lesbian Action Group was established by women who were active in the lesbian rights movement in the 1980s and 90s. It is supported by [LGB Alliance Australia](#), the local chapter of a British-based organisation whose promotion of sex-based rights has pushed it into the front line of a rolling gender war.

The author of the application, Carole Ann, is a lesbian and feminist campaigner who 20 years ago unsuccessfully sought an exemption from the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to allow the continuation of Lesfest, a national lesbian festival and conference which ran for more than a decade.

More recently, she attended the Let Women Speak rally in Melbourne gatecrashed by neo-Nazis. The fallout from the rally split the Victorian Liberal party room, triggered a backroom purge within the Victorian Greens and fuelled an activist campaign against gender-critical feminist writer and University of Melbourne lecturer Holly Lawford-Smith.

[The application](#), if successful, will allow the Lesbian Action Group to lawfully discriminate against people on the basis of sex and sexuality for the purpose of staging lesbian-only events. Ann said the application was not transphobic.

“It is not anti-trans, it is pro-lesbians who are born female,” she said. “We are not asking for anyone to be denied who they are. It is for us to also be recognised for who we are and have a bit of space for that and acknowledgement that our lived experience is different.”

The AHRC application, which is open to public submissions, is likely to be opposed by trans rights groups.

An LGB Alliance application for a similar exemption under Tasmanian law was last year rejected by Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commissioner Sarah Bolt and the Tasmanian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. In Britain, the LGB Alliance is defending its charitable status against a legal challenge brought by Mermaids, a trans-rights group.

Nicole Mowbray, a member of both the Lesbian Action Group and LGB Alliance Australia, said the risks associated with staging women-only events had caused a once thriving lesbian community in Melbourne to retreat behind closed doors. She also attended the Let Women Speak rally and said she was horrified by the aggression she witnessed against women.

“The paradox is we can legally get married but we can’t exclusively meet in a single-sex space,” she said.

“We need to find a way to coexist and respect that women and gay men need single-sex events, just as we respect that trans people need their own events. Women are sick of being in the shadows again and having to be secretive.”

The Sex Discrimination Act contains permanent exemptions for charities, religious bodies, schools and volunteer organisations.

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