

We are strong

by each other

and strong

by our hearts

Walk On Walk Strong

COMPILED BY THE STARTTS WALK ON WALK STRONG GROUP

Walk On Walk Strong

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land over which sovereignty was never ceded. We acknowledge their elders, past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge the ongoing trauma of colonisation and dispossession.

We support social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We acknowledge the lives of people with diverse genders, sexualities, families, relationships and cultures who never made it to safety or are still experiencing harm. We hope for a world where all people are able to live in freedom.

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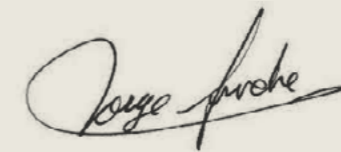
Acknowledgments

Introduction

Walk on Walk Strong is the result of over six years of the STARTTS LGBTIQA+ project. The project has raised awareness, raised voices and made change for people who have refugee and asylum-seeking experiences and expansive genders, sexualities, bodies families, and relationships. The global situation facing this cohort is extremely dangerous. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual or queer people routinely endure discrimination, persecution, and violence. This leaves many LGBTIQA+ people with no choice but leave their home countries.

Walk On Walk Strong pays homage to these experiences. It is told in their own words and it is these words I would like to honour in this introduction. These diverse communities have resisted enormous hardships. They have done this together and individually. It is my belief that supporting marginalised people and communities is at the heart of our work at STARTTS.

When I read Walk On Walk Strong, I was moved by the diversity, the courage, the humour and the love and friendship found in these stories. One image that stays with me is the bridge of belonging. The contributors to this project build this bridge every day despite facing ongoing harm. In standing together and standing up to adversity they are an inspiration to all of us. I am very proud of the STARTTS LGBTIQA+ project and the work we will carry on into the future. We remain committed to a better, safer and kinder world. Walk On Walk Strong instils much needed hope. I would like to thank everyone who contributed. Thank you for sharing your lives with us.



Jorge Aroche
Chief Executive Officer
STARTTS

Why this document?

There is limited information about the numbers of people seeking asylum or refuge on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation across the globe, but what we do know is that more than 70 countries criminalise same-sex activity between consenting adults and 11 countries carry the death penalty.

We know that people with diverse genders, sexualities, bodies, relationships and families experience harassment, arrest, imprisonment, torture and murder. Queer-identifying people are taunted, assaulted, raped and murdered by aggressors who know they will not be punished by the authorities.

According to the UN Commission for Human Rights, violence against LGBTIQ+ persons tends to be especially vicious compared to other bias-motivated crimes. In general, LGBTIQ+ women face more private harm, including sexual violence, forced marriage, abuse, intimate partner violence and murder. This mistreatment happens across the entire journey towards refuge in Australia, and even once people have arrived here.

Walk On Walk Strong aims to honour the journey that people continue after reaching Australia and the skills, knowledges, strengths, intentions, hopes, dreams and values they bring to their lives. We hope by creating this collective document to recognise, share and provide a forum for discussion, to raise knowledge about our experiences, and to build our community and grow our skills.

Who we are?

Walk On Walk Strong is a group of people who have come to Australia to find refuge. We come from different countries, ethnicities, faiths, education, abilities, languages, sexual orientations, gender identities, families and relationships. We come together to support each other, and others, with similar experiences. Many of us have loved through terrible times and even in Australia we face discrimination and disenfranchisement. Despite this we thrive. We choose to honour our pasts and dream for our futures.

Walk On Walk Strong run peer-led psychosocial support groups, we train intentional inclusive practice workshops for settlement, multicultural, interpreter and LGBTIQ+ services, and we create resources to support LGBTIQ+ people with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

We want to remember that words matter, and language keeps evolving. We mostly talk about people with diverse genders, sexualities, bodies, relationships and families, and refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds, but sometimes we might say LGBTIQ+ folks. We don't necessarily fit into categories, and we use words that describe how we feel on any given day. For some of us the words never change; for others change is part of who we are. In our group there is a rainbow. We are gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, pansexual people, trans men, trans women, non-binary folks, cis folks, tops and bottoms; some of us switch, some of us are queer, some of us pass for straight or cis, some of us do not, some of us have partners, some of us have jobs and some do not; we have different bodies, different journeys, and different ways of being and becoming. We are many.

Acknowledging privilege and diversity is integral to how we collaborate. Sometimes this is easy, sometimes it can be challenging. We are not colour blind, gender blind or pretending that all of us have had the same advantages, but we aim to hold each other up, to witness each other and to resolve conflict and stand up against discrimination. There is love between us.

What's in this document?

This document has been developed from our words and stories. Some of these stories we told one-on-one and some we told while sitting together. This document weaves between our ideas as a group and stories of our own experience. We talked about what skills we have, where we learned them and what they say about us as individuals and as a community. We talked about our journeys, our struggles and our triumphs.

We told these stories because we want to be heard. We want to be seen and we want you to know we are here. We want to share where we have been, what we have learned, our wisdom and our joy.

After telling the stories and choosing themes, we came back together and listened as we read them aloud. We responded to them by asking what words or images stood out, what moved us, and how we might be different from hearing each other's stories.

These responses are included as part of this document. They are called 'stories in response'.

We chose the content areas together. The six content areas we defined collectively are:

Belonging
Empowerment
Trust

Being true to myself
Many roads

Messages to LGBTIQ+ people with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

We hope these areas open up the space to build not only meaning, but also to reflect how identity changes and grows over time.

The image that came to us for this work is the phoenix.

It rises from the ashes.

We want you to know that we also rise.

What we hope for our readers

We want to empower all people with refugee backgrounds who have expansive genders and sexualities to discover skills and purposes in life and to be strong, by which we mean knowing they can survive challenges and start again fresh.

We hope people read this document with their hearts and not their eyes, and that this document opens the hearts of the people around the world who have not accepted us. We hope this document builds connection and helps create meaning and purpose for us and our readers. We would like to co-create possibilities for acceptance.

For ourselves we hope that sharing our stories is a way of being true to who we are and who we want to be and, through this process, expand our ideas about who we can be.

We hope to create a space for people to be heard, to build bridges, to choose transformation over limited ideas of inclusion.

Belonging is where we meet each other
across the things that divide us.

We chose belonging because that is
what is often lost in our journeys,
but we know it can be remade.

The bridge of belonging

When I'm listening, I start seeing that all of us want to actually be ourselves; and I feel I can be myself. I feel I'm being counted; I feel belonging.

I can see a picture of a bridge – the bridge shows my journey to be safe – it is the bridge of belonging. On that side of the bridge are negative things, challenges, bad words, rejection, the justice is not there, but across the bridge here, finally there is love.

We only feel safe when we are in community

For some of us the first and most important thing is safety. Everything else comes after. I only feel safe when I'm in community. My family rejected me but when I found community, I finally felt safe.

Since I arrived here it wasn't even safe, but I came to realise I can have my own space, I can be safe if I mingle around with community. I can open up.

We only feel safe when we are in community

When I heard people with lived experience similar to my story talking about their lives, that changed my whole life. Even though I do not tell my story out, but when I'm listening, I start seeing that all of us want to actually be ourselves; and I feel I can be myself. I feel I'm being counted; I feel belonging. I feel this is my right. That's a nice word. I feel belonging. This is the right place for me.

The African community is too small. When I meet an African from the gay community it takes me time to come out, but when I have the confidence to it feels good. Even now I never go around any African community events. I've been here for going on five years and still now when I go around African people it can trigger me a lot. But whenever I am together with people who have stories like mine it doesn't trigger the trauma. Then I feel that confidence.

I feel the same about the Iranian community. I try my best not to mingle with them as much as possible. Did you know basically all of the swearing words in Persian have something to do with gay people? I don't want to be around them to hear those words. But what I see is that the meaning of my name is 'warrior', and we are warriors.

There is power in numbers

In order to stand up, to have power and courage, I have to join with everyone.

When I started to engage with the community I was not yet empowered. It took a long time for me to feel free and to share but when I did do it, it was a healing process. I remember going to Mardi Gras for the first time and this changes my whole self. When I first arrived, I had bad judgment about myself and about other people, and I felt for a long time that I was apart. When I was in that big event I saw, and I learned. I saw a lot of people and they were safe on the streets, and I felt I'm here. I get to be more open, and I feel I'm actually really here. It opened up my mind to see that. This is the people that I felt I had been like for a long time, and I can be a part of them. That big event was a realisation for me that I am not alone.

In my country I am an activist. But in order to stand up, to have power and courage, I have to join with everyone. I have to know the people are behind and beside me, that they have my back. In this country I am still an activist. I can do this because I have back up from my community. This keeps me strong and unshakable. There is power in numbers.



Making safety and choosing family

Here I've learned I can have hope. If you meet the right people, your life can take shape again. I can do this also for those around me.

Some people have been rejected by family. We become our own family. We choose each other. We check on each other and communicate. During Covid we especially looked out for each other. Doing everything we could to keep us together. It was very difficult being alone, it brought back terrible times, but I knew I could call. I could ask for support.

At home I lost my safety. Members of my own family said, 'I'm going to kill you'. They threaten me and follow me. I feel like I lose my life. In my country you don't want anyone to know – they will disappear you – one minute you are here, the next minute you go. You are always in danger and not just you, your family too. People don't really see you. They don't even know who you are. They see you physically, but they don't know who is inside. Here I've learned I can have hope. If you meet the right people, your life can take shape again. I can do this also for those around me. When I see their strength, I am a strong person too. This has kept me alive. I share my stories with people who could hear them. This makes me happy.

We share our lives, our feelings. Love is what you need. We learn these skills from our community and from the strength of those who have suffered.

Stories told in response

If any trans women wanted to do that surgery, I wanted to be there too with them to support them.

In Malaysia, us trans women are staying in one place, we help each other. We buy one kilo of rice, and we cook. We share. We're trying to fit each other. We're trying to laugh, wear like a girl dress, jumping, do a lot of stuff. Looking at mans. That's all such nice memories; that we chose each other, and we have the life together. When I went for my surgery, before they going to take you for the operation, they do personal procedures and I feel very uncomfortable. I tell the nurses, 'Can I do it myself? Can I ask my friend to do it?' And then after your surgery, you can't even do anything. I want to go to washroom. You feel very uncomfortable and your hair and your body, everything needs washing, and I don't really feel comfortable with the nurses. My friend helps me. She helps me with everything. Within three days, I get discharged. I take a flight from Thailand to Singapore and Singapore by road to Malaysia. And I get there, and the community was there. They help. So that's what it's like. Today, if any trans women wanted to do that surgery, I wanted to be there too with them to support them.

During Mardi Gras in the cricket ground, dancing, I see thousands of people, but I can't recognise anyone that I knew and then I saw B in the stand, and they saw me. It was a very good day for me. Someone who is like part of your family is there and I felt their presence, I felt them with me.

When you come from a family where they don't support that, you'll think, is it safe for me? Because you can lose. There is a lot of risk. I tell my friends because I want to. I don't tell the wrong people. I choose my friends and I choose my family.



A very different kind of life

She always respects whatever path life I take, whatever decision I make.

My parents were very strict in the way that they wanted to do the upbringing of their children. Our house had that environment that nothing was allowed, it was very strict. I used to go to my aunt's place and spend the nights there. It was like second home. I always wanted to be there more than home and my aunt was very respectful of me. The respect goes both ways, and it has always been like that since my childhood. She and my grandfather, they were people that, whenever I had some difficulty, even though I didn't tell them what it was, I just wanted to be around them.

My dad and my mom used to do punishment for us till I was nine, 10; it was physical and also locking up in the dark room. My aunt she did it once, I remember, but it wasn't as bad. And she explained it to me, why she was doing it. You know, instead of just doing it she did it in a way that was good for me. It was the first time an adult was explaining to me.

After that one time she never punished me for anything. Whenever I did something wrong as a child, she would talk to me about it ... when you do this, it can cause this, and this is the consequences of your action. It was a very logical way. Our relationship has always been like that.

I've never told her I'm gay; it would make her very upset, not because of the sexual orientation, because of the pain that I have been through in terms of coming out, and I think, there is no need to make her suffer. But I'm pretty sure she has an idea because, you know, in, in our culture, it's very common to ask, why don't you get married? Or those kinds of things. But my aunt, she never puts me in that situation. She always respects whatever path life I take, whatever decision I make.

She believes that it's my life and whatever I choose and decide she's happy with that. If I want to marry somebody, if I don't want to marry someone. If someday it happens that she would know about it, it's not a big deal at all. It's just that I don't want her to be sad about all I've been through, I'm doing it for her protection.

Whenever I doubt myself or whenever I feel I'm not good enough I just think about how she sees me, and it makes me feel better. I'm going to keep thinking about the way that she sees me.

I learned a lot from her; cooking and how to be very open mind person. In our culture it's very hard to find somebody that's open minded, but I think because she has always been curious about knowledge and learning new things, I learned this too. She also showed me another very important thing; that I was not obliged to follow my parents' path of thinking and doing things. She showed me an alternative. She chose a very different kind of life compared to the norm. She has always been independent, she is a widow, a woman with a decent job, with a career and so very independent. She never had children and my brothers, and I are like her children. She showed me an alternative way of thinking and doing things and it was very, very liberating for me.

Even when brothers didn't like the way I was feminine – they wanted a different kind of brother, a fighting one, but I wasn't like that. My kindness and care were feminine. It's still feminine and they never liked that but, my aunt, she always admired me for those qualities. She said don't worry about those boys. I always preferred my aunt's way of doing things. She doesn't take any grudges. She's friendly with everybody. Everybody loves her.

In our extended family everybody says that we are very similar. She says I'm very patient. I can overcome any obstacles in my life. I'm very capable person. I'm smart. I make right decisions. And for her, she knows I care for her. I always, always in my life care for her, and I always respected her. I always defended her, and I protected her, and she made it very easy for me to share things with her.

She's so proud of me and I really love her kind heart. Whenever I doubt myself or whenever I feel I'm not good enough I just think about how she sees me, and it makes me feel better. I'm going to keep thinking about the way that she sees me.

Empowerment is having a voice
and knowing you can use it
and then using it.

We chose empowerment because
it changes us all.

When we are empowered,
we stand up
for what is important
to us.

Getting empowered is the light at the end of the tunnel

Getting empowered is the light at the time feel the light is real. When you are coming from my country you can't come out because in Africa you can even lose your life. You are in the dark. You don't even know that at the end of the time you can get the light. But when we are sitting here like this, talking, I can see the light. That's the light.

One happy story of being empowered is when I get my ex-partner out of Villawood. We battled all the way to the ministerial level, and it was a big challenge. He was scared of the repercussions, and I said, 'we can do it', but it was scary. If you lose you have to pay the state all the costs and this is a lot of money. All the money we had. During this immigration process I was mistreated, mis-gendered and spoken badly about. In the end the judge actually apologised to me, but this was after. After we won. But it was very difficult going through it. What kept me going was knowing what I believe and not focusing on bad things.

It matters to me that I believe in who I am and concentrate on a successful story of who I am. I think everyone can have this ability if they have people around them who see them.

It matters to me that I believe in who I am and concentrate on a successful story of who I am. I think everyone can have this ability if they have people around them who see them.

I can see a different version of myself after what I went through. Those bad times are now history for me. I used to just be quiet because of what I was going through. I was not someone who can share any story with people. At night I was asking myself: 'Is this normal? In what way have I gone wrong? Is it normal to feel like this, not attracted to men? What is happening to me?' I used to ask myself all those questions and very often, 'Is coming here the right thing to do?' I want to be very honest; I had a good life when I was at home. I can't imagine the things I have had to do. I can't imagine myself going to get a free lunch at a service. I had to do this because I don't have money or friends or family in Australia. Especially when you come from those countries where LGBTIQ+ is a taboo, you think you're not normal. You don't even, you don't even express yourself. Cause you, you are even forced into marriage. And then finally you see other people who are also like you and that's when you see, 'Oh it happens. It's a normal thing.' That's when you start to think, 'Oh, okay, so I'm normal. And now I'm proud to be like this and I'm from this community and this is my reality. And I have a right to live, like normal people, all people.'

My friend, who has been very sick, was in the hospital and she's not comfortable for the nurses to wash her or touch her and I went to the hospital to give my details as her next of kin. And all of us our community went to care for her. The nurse wanted to make a big drama and I fought back. I said, 'I've written all my details here properly neatly: phone number, email, everything.' I said, 'Please, can you file this?' So, if she needs anything, call me.' And then the doctor started saying, 'You aren't a relative' and, I said, 'Excuse me, ma'am, all I'm asking you to do is just take the specific paper and put it in the file and contact me if she needs.' I do all this because a trans woman of colour in a hospital and in that ward, is not fully safe or comfortable but we are strong by each other. You have to be strong and trust yourself. That is getting empowered.

Starting fresh

To start off in a new life a career, it's not something I take lightly.

When people are relocated with a change of context and have to start from scratch, it's not an easy journey. They had built a life where they come from and had hopes. To start off in a new life a career, it's not something I take lightly. With me back home, I sit on a national level. I sit with ministers, I'm important. I'm a well-known person. And to go to Australia, I have to start from scratch, to build my reputation, to be noticed. It takes a lot of work. But when people are behind me, I would tell myself, 'I can do this.' When you represent you, you are representing all the people. That's how I feel about when I represent. It's not only about me.

Talking is healing, tears are healing

I reflect on some of the negative things that I've experienced, but when I am with people who know what it is like to be me, then this brings the solidarity

If I can't cry, I lose my strength. If I don't bring it out with words or with tears, then I suffer more.

I'm happy today even when the tears come to my eyes. The more the tears come out, the stronger I am. Sometimes I reflect on some of the negative things that I've experienced, but when I am with people who know what it is like to be me, then this brings the solidarity, and every single time, I say to myself, 'Be strong', and I say to the others, 'Be strong', and we make the strength together. I can easily feel my tears and they build us together.

Stories told in response

The more you cry sometimes you get healing and sometimes you see that being a man is more than one way.

Our tears are beautiful tears, they are about shared emotion. It's not just you who has the feeling, but all of us together having that feeling.

For men there is this stigma behind crying, especially for men, but I always, I cry and cry. I don't hold it back. Even the more you cry sometimes you get healing and sometimes you see that being a man is more than one way.



In my blood, in my bone

I think making people happy, it makes the world a better place. It matters to be a good person and beat the hate.

Something I'm good at is helping people. If someone needs help, I can be there for the person and listen to the person. This helping and listening is the whole story of my life. It's something that happens every day. I can't help it. I see my friends and I'm like, 'Hey, how are you? Are you sure?' I have even one friend, he's like, 'Why are you asking me at this time when we are hanging out?' But it's a thing I have. Helping by listening.

I think because I grew up doing that, helping people, being of service, it's already in my blood, in my bone. No matter how you would want even not to do it, it doesn't matter, I will always do it.

I know how to help because I can relate to people's stories or maybe it's because I've been there and even if the other person doesn't recognise it, I just know how. I know people want to feel like they have a family, they are home, they have a safe place. I help them, I make that moment when I just met them feel like a good moment. I talk with them, see how their week was and sometimes they might start talking about it.

I get that feeling of how the person is and sometimes even I do a few simple things to just make them feel happy and safe. So even though we are not talking about what happened or anything, at the end they end up saying something, even though they thought were not ready to share it.

My intention is to keep that person to feel happy because when they're happy, I'm happy. I think making people happy, it makes the world a better place. It matters to be a good person and beat the hate. None of this would surprise the people that I have helped.

Now, I want to learn to give it back to myself and to see the other people that I have given service to giving service towards other people. I see that when they're feeling safe in their place, they're able and happy to give back to other people. This keeps me going.

Stories told in response

I love to help people. I love to do it not just by talking, but by doing, by sharing my own experience. I feel one day I will be big in this place. Why not?

When you see a change, when you see happiness in someone's face, it tells that is the biggest thing you could have done, there's a great impact that you brought to their life.



I choose a new name

Even if my identity in my documents is wrong from what I feel I do not care, I choose a new name. A new life and a new name; the name is a way to do this, a new beginning.

I remember going to church; it is not a good time and I have no friends. When they pray, the boys stand here and then the other side there are the girls. So, I leave the girls side and go to boys' side. It was a big problem. They tell me to go, to leave the church.

When I want to go in the bathroom at school, church and anywhere. I go for the boys' bathroom. That was a big problem.

I worked in a business, and they know I'm a transgender man, but my documents and my identity are different to them, so they use this to get me to work for much less money than other people. They know they can exploit me. And I accept this. I have my qualifications to be, to get more, more paid and the job, but I accepted this because my situation and I agree for them.

But in all these situations, I will still do what is suitable for me. What I feel is suitable for me. I'm a man. I will do it. I will not accept to be the old person I was. Even if my identity in my documents is wrong from what I feel I do not care, I choose a new name. A new life and a new name; the name is a way to do this, a new beginning. Everything in my life must be new. I will listen to this feeling coming from inside me saying, 'I will push you to work, I will help you to reach your goals.' I have self-confidence and I can do anything.



Trust is knowing
we are safe.

It is choosing people who will not
betray or harm us. It is telling our
stories
without fear.

We chose trust because so often
it has been threatened. But still our
trust is not broken.

We know how
to make it.

This colour is not easy

I went to a big party, and I was dancing with this White lady, and we were having fun. And she was a bit drunk, but we took each other's numbers. The next day she did see I was Black, and she stopped responding to me and I knew. This colour is not easy. But I don't give up because I am brave and what makes me happy is what is important to me. People can be very, very cruel, but you build up and build up and build up and you cry, and you laugh, and you keep going. When people turn you away because of your colour you say, 'Enough is enough.' This is my way of handling things. That chapter is closed but of course it never really gets closed.

People can be very, very cruel, but you build up and build up and build up and you cry, and you laugh, and you keep going.

There's a lot of White people in Australia and when you come, you see I am Black colour and it's difficult, but also the power of you grows when you see a lot of people of colour who are here and are doing well. This seeing and this experience of other people makes you solid and makes yourself know it's not only a White country. I am a manager, and I can tell White people to do this or do that. They work under me. People like us can come here and my colour doesn't mean that I can't make change and grow big.

Stories told in response

I think every time a black woman wins, or a brown skin woman is winning we are all winning.

Discrimination is every day.

Discrimination is every day. I have so many times. When I was in the bus, I was sitting, and I was not breathing nicely so I put my mask here at my neck for a minute. This old man. He came into my space and started yelling. And I was panicking. And he said, 'This is not for display' and he was poking and yelling. He was so much terrible. Then this other lady said, 'What about this one here, what about her mask?' Because she was White, she could speak. She said, 'What about this one without her mask, this White one. You only went to this lady.' Then he was just quiet.

What makes it powerful is when another person stands up for us. In my eyes, when I stand up within my Iranian community, I need somebody from that community to say, 'I'm with you.'

Even when I see a White person down, I wanted to cheer them out. You light up someone. I feel that.

Whenever I see Miss Universe or other famous women are mixed and are winning, I feel good. I think every time a black woman wins, or a brown skin woman is winning we are all winning.



Sometimes we have to be careful who we trust

So even though our community is small, since that day I know I am part of them. These are people I can trust.

When I first arrived, I went to a service, and they had a sign which said 'You are safe here', and I trusted those people and then I was put in a share house with straight people who knew I was gay and used bad words about me all the time. I don't know how some of them came to know about me being gay. But the situation got worse and worse against me. I hear them talking bad things about being gay and it hurt me so much. I went and I said to this service, 'Can you find me somewhere else to go?' But they did not take me serious and so I left and then things were very bad, ice and terrible things. I'm still struggling to find housing. I told my situation to a nurse at another service. She said, 'You should call the police if people threaten you.'

But in my country the police will beat you, rape you, torture you. This is not safe to call them. It was very, very hard, and I did not know if I would live. But one day I came to this group, and this changed my whole life. I could still hear the voices of those people in the house but in this place, with these people, I feel I belong. I feel this is the right place for me. The group asked me, 'Are you ok?' And they meant it. So even though our community is small, since that day I know I am part of them. These are people I can trust. Even when we are together and something very sad happens, still, I feel safe, love and connected. Everyone felt my pain. It is difficult but I choose who I can trust.

I choose who I tell

I only tell people in soft places and that is empowerment for me.

It can be good to tell but it's not always safe. At work I will never tell them. They already give me so much trouble because of my colour; if they know I am lesbian it will be very bad, double bad, triple bad even. So, I don't tell them. I struggle with depression, and I want to know, 'What did I do wrong to be this way?' I had a life at home, but it was secret, and I couldn't ever be myself. Here I can be out of the closet if I want but I don't have to be.

I only tell people in soft places and that is empowerment for me. I learned this from my community, I used to be scared of people but now I can choose to voice it out or not. In the past I worried; now I see what other people like me have done. My community pushed me, they drag me from being quiet. I used to think I can't talk and now I can. When I first came here, I lived in a house with people and I didn't want them to know anything about me, but of course they did. Everyone is always talking. They were full of judgment. I never even went into the kitchen. I used to go to a service and get lunch and then ask for food for dinner so I could not see these people, I felt their hate like knives. But now I'm proud of myself. I left my home, my work, my truck, my country, my friends, my family. I was homeless and depressed and now I can voice it out or not. Who I tell about being a Black lesbian is up to me. This is my decision. I love to come out when it suits me. I know who I am. I don't look back. I don't see myself as brave, I know I can do more, and I can be better.

Self-reliance

Self-reliance gives me a good feeling.

*whatever happens,
I know I can handle it.*

*Self-reliance led to independence.
And that's one of the branches and,
for me, the second ones are compassion
and empathy.*

When I was a child, I started to notice that I was different. I'm talking about the time when I was three or four, so very, very little. It was a kind of attraction to the same sex. It wasn't sexual at all, it was just preferring. In Iran, when you start your school, they are gender separated. But for kindergarten and preschool, they are mixed, and I noticed that boys wanted to play with girls, but I just wanted to be with boys. I mention it one or two times, and then I saw the backlash of it. Even those little children like myself, they said, 'Oh, you're a girl!', and then I talked to my parents, and they said, 'Be a man, be a boy.' That moment in time was the moment that I started not to share things and to rely on myself for finding solutions or finding other ways; like even if I had a problem, I would create a story about somebody else, and just as if I was asking for advice for them.

As I grew older and older, it became more and more important for me to rely on myself. And then it became a very big thing for me. And when I was a teenager and I discovered more about myself and my sexuality, it became more and more important. It became my saviour through my whole life.

When I came to Australia as a refugee, that was the thing that really helped me because although I have a very good support you cannot rely on that all the time, you need to lead your life and go ahead with it and make decisions and take the responsibility for the decisions that you make for yourself. It's one of the things that I keep as a very dear thing to me. Self-reliance gives me a good feeling. I know how to deal with a situation whatever it is, and I also don't need to rely on myself completely. I can get a therapy. I can talk to my friends but in the end, whatever happens, I know I can handle it. Yes, I can handle it.

I used self-reliance very recently. At my new job I'm dealing with people who have problems and organising services for them. Some of the clients are very difficult, and you need to remind yourself that they are suffering, so you shouldn't take it personally, but sometimes it's hard to do that because you feel it as an attack, you know, they can make fun your accent or they can make it so personal.

I know that it's because of their suffering and pain that they have, but in terms of dealing with, I go back to that self-reliance. I noticed that it started when I was a little boy and then it grew branches. Self-reliance led to independence. And that's one of the branches and, for me, the second ones are compassion and empathy.

When I hear a story about the suffering or pain of another person, I go back into myself and find ways to relate to that person. It happens so naturally for me now I don't need to think about it that much. I think the reason is I have gone through that pain of being on your own and trying to find ways in life to rely on myself in times of crisis.

As a child, I was very nerdy and people would always say, 'B loves to read books, B loves to solve puzzles' and things like that. The reason was because I couldn't ask for the answers I needed directly. For those matters, I needed to learn it from somewhere. I started to broaden my knowledge by reading. I used to read a lot as a child, and it was to the point that I would stay up at night in secrecy to read when everybody was sleeping.

I was so thirsty to learn. I remember that everybody around me used to say, 'You are not a child. You think and act like an adult.' It wasn't that good. I couldn't let myself experience the things that other children experienced. I was very conscious of my actions. And as a very tiny child, it's not a good thing. You need to learn from your mistakes or to go wild, things in those ages when you are 6, 7, 8. But I wasn't like that. I was reserved, and I was within myself most of the time. And then, I became a very good listener.

Whenever I think about my childhood, I see that four-years-old, five-years-old B. I see myself in one of the rooms of the houses that I used to live. It wasn't a big room so, because it was a small room and I used to share it with my brothers at that time I wasn't lonely. Later on, when we moved to different houses and the rooms were big, I felt more lonely in those ones, but in this image, I was tiny little boy and I see myself, I had a cream-colour onesie, and that room, funnily enough, it had a very big closet.

Being true to myself means
being who I am;

it means standing up
for ourselves.

We chose being true to myself
because this a story for all of us.

We choose to do this quite often
even if it can be
dangerous.

This is me

*When I meet people
I say my name,
I say my pronouns,
I say I know who I am.*

When people hear my voice, they know I am not the same as other people. For a long time, I was scared to go out. I was depressed. Then my partner said to me: 'Your voice is your voice. You are a transgender woman, and you have to be proud of this, and you have to be strong. We are together, we are one, we are community.' Now if someone talks to me as a male, then this is not anything to do with me. It hurts me but it is not me. When I talk to someone, I just be myself. It comes to me that I can be comfortable, and I can shine out and say, 'This is me.' I have the feeling of freedom.

In Australia I have learned about laws and what is allowed. This is helpful because I know my rights. In my country I am not safe, but I am much safer here, so much safer. I can raise concerns and when I am facing hatred, I can hold onto this knowing even when I have bad feelings. When I meet people I say my name, I say my pronouns, I say I know who I am. I'm proud. I say, 'This is my reality and I have the right to live if you accept me or don't accept me. I will live the life I dream of.'

Stories told in response



There is an Arabic song, 'Wal Beyhemeni' by Nawal A Zoghbi, that has helped me a lot. That song is talking about: I don't care about them. I just love you. I don't care about them. Whatever they say, I don't care what they think of me.

What you are talking about is coming to a feeling of myself also as a lesbian. To me, it means I can talk. I'm free. I just be myself.

I face this problem; this is a main problem of my life, but now I, I understand how to deal with it. So before, if I go to shop or buy something or talk to anyone on the street, at first they talk to me as a female, and everything is okay as normal. But when they hear my voice, they changed the pronouns. So that was hurting me a lot. But now I don't care. I don't have to explain. It's no problem now for me. I just, when they talk to me as a male, I just look at them and laugh. I do like this [purses lips, raises eyebrow]. At first, I very anger, maybe I do strange things like hit the mobile on the ground and the world. But now I don't care.

What you are talking about is coming to a feeling of myself also as a lesbian. To me, it means I can talk. I'm free. I just be myself.

Talking to myself, listening to myself

*I say:
How much you are beautiful.
I say:
We will find a way.*

I listen to myself and talk to myself. Even back home I didn't rely on my family, I had to rely on myself. I cannot share who I am. People see the outside and it looks easy to them. They don't know the struggle. So when I talk to myself, it feels good. When I have doubts, I say, 'You can do it.' This is common for many LGBTIQ+ people; they have an ability to look out for themselves, to hold secrets, and to continue living so no one can see our pain.

I look at myself in the mirror and I see myself and I say the things I want to hear from others.

I say them to myself.

*I tell myself:
You can overcome obstacles.*

*I say:
How much you are beautiful.*

*I say:
We will find a way.*

*I say:
If other people can look gorgeous,
why not me? I can be this.*

*I say:
I am not ugly.
I am possible.
I can be like this.
I say:
You can't please everyone.*

In my first job at a hairdresser everyone sees me as a boy, so what I do is I imagine myself as if I am a customer. As if it is me leaving the salon with my hair and my nails done. Sometimes I dress up just a little bit as a girl and the manager supports me and, slowly, I start to see myself in a different way. I see myself as myself. Little by little, week by week, and I keep going. I keep going because the sense of truthness matters and it will always be there with me. It reminds me to stay who I am. It keeps me going and moving.

I also talk to myself when I think everything is darkness. I talk to the mirror, and I talk to myself, and sometimes, I find sometimes crazy. But I do it anyway.

*I say:
I am not ugly.
I am possible.
I can be like this.*

*I say:
You can't please everyone.*

Stories told in response

*You can stick with your culture,
you can stick with your beliefs,
but let us walk as we want to walk.*

I think everything touches me, I feel it and I feel myself, but I don't know what to say. In Tamil we say, 'You cannot feel our presence, you think we don't exist.' In other words: You can stick with your culture, you can stick with your beliefs, but let us walk as we want to walk.

When we were very young, I have beautiful friends, activists, and what we do in order to present our existence in our community to show: this is us, we are here. Someone will call and say, let's do a thing tomorrow. We dress up like Paris Hilton and run into restaurants where diplomats, ministers, big people have breakfast or lunch. We'll sit there. And the ministers will take a look at us. They will see us. We are here. Then we just dash out and walk and don't talk to anyone. Later we go to the media; we started coming out and saying that these are our rights. We remind them, those people, that they saw us. So that's how we started. This is my way of activism, to be present to the public and the community that we do exist. We run into these people and tell them we are here to stay.



The flower of self-worth

The flower of self-worth has so many petals.

I am like that flower.

Self-worth has got lots of things in it. It's got listening. It's got voicing up. It's got self-confidence. It's got courage. It gives me the courage and it makes me strong.

It's a flower opening from the bud to the bloom. When it's a bud, the roots, the soil, is feeding the flower to be able to come out and then show the quality of what is inside. The people that are actually with me are like the leaves holding up that flower. They are underneath that flower. This makes the flower more beautiful. When I open up, the flower will come out and I think that the thing that this brings me is my own stability. The flower of self-worth has so many petals.

Whatever the plan it will always bring a different side of that flower. The colour will be like when you see the scale of a fish, iridescent. When you see it, and when you turn it around, it's pure, like violet. After one, two days, three days, the colour starts to mature. It becomes purple, then a little bit darker pink or red, then it becomes more like light pink and then it's blooming.

I am like that flower. Physically people don't see me. I may be not physically attractive, but the things that comes from my mouth and inside from my heart and what I do, that's when people start to realise how I am as a person. When people see my physical appearance, they will see differences and they will start building a wall between them and me. But if they allow themselves to be with me in the journey, they will see the way I do things, they will start to see more of the characteristics of myself shining out. That's what it makes me beautiful, who I am from inside. It's not from outside.

I'm committed to educate my fellow people to become more inclusive in terms of working, education, within the family, the communities, with my religion, with my people, from my ethnic background, and all those things. It's a challenge sometimes. But it's also that challenge makes it easier because I understand that on this earth it's not always going to go smooth.

When I was still young, they hurt me; they were always hitting me and doing bad stuff for me to turn away from myself, to kill me inside. But they can't do it.

These core values you learn from your mother or father. Even if they have been passed away, they left that legacy. It always goes back to the tradition and the culture; it's there already, it's there and you carry that with you. This past feeds me to be able to become that flower.

Even those people that they don't really have lights in their mind, there's things for them to learn and to become lighter. I trust in that. I respect them but at the same time I teach them along the way so they can get to get more lighter than being in the dark. We have been born together. I can't cut that.

When I was still young, they hurt me; they were always hitting me and doing bad stuff for me to turn away from myself, to kill me inside. But they can't do it. They never do it and even despite this I can't disown them. No.

But what I can do is be who I am.

I see myself moving from being afraid, from shutting my mouth, to being able to see myself growing. I keep learning, imagining, learning, because the more you learn, the more you become yourself.

The flower says to me, 'always stay positive', and it pushes me to go on, to keep going, keep going. I think people who see me would say, 'You're a very powerful woman and I can't wait for 10 years from now to see what you will be.'

Stories told in response

*I actually have a say in my own life.
I have to make my self-worth.
To say, 'I'm capable.'*

You let the flower blossom.

When I saw the flower of self-worth, I thought I never got to learn how to have a self-worth. In my country, it was like more like, no matter what people does to you, it's fine, you just have to obey, and this is not letting the flower blossom of your self-worth. It gets killed. Which means it's killing your confidence. Like having negative thoughts that you're not worthy. You just have to be there and do whatever they want, even though it's not what you want or what you need or what you feel like is good for your body and stuff. Where I'm from, we don't get to be taught to recognise these kinds of things like, what are your weakness? Where are your strengths? This is kind of Western thinking. In my culture, they think you're trying to show off or that you are better than them.

When I go to in Australia, I learn I actually have a say in my own life. I have to make my self-worth. To say, 'I'm capable.' This is a challenge since for 20 years you have no experience of your self-worth. It's learning a new thing, believing in yourself and showing it to the world. It's a bit hard. But here's a place when they see self-worth as a good thing.

It's my goal, the flower of self-worth, like when you plant the seed and you let the flower blossom. One part of this is saying, 'Look at what you have done.' Then that's when you start realising, hold on, that's true, why am I not giving myself the credit that I have done this? So now I put water on the seed and the water is getting the knowledge about giving credit to yourself and knowing you are worthy of love, safety and good things. And that one day you get a garden.

When you are talking to me

I think about walking by the river

*In the afternoon sun and the possibility
of dancing under the moon*

The cat watching from her chair

Both us

Patient

Calm

Responsible

Happy

Perhaps this is love

When you are talking to me

I think about walking by the river

*In the afternoon sun and the possibility
of dancing under the moon*

The cat watching from her chair

Both us

Patient

Calm

Responsible

Happy

Perhaps this is love



The man of impossible things

What is inside will come out and I will be this person. No matter how it cost me, I will be this person.

There is this feeling that pushes me very strong against the problems that visit me and change my life. I know I am a man. Even if they accept me or not, this feeling says to me: If you want to do this, you are strong, you will do it. This feeling supports me a lot. In Egypt, you can't talk with anyone. You can't search for surgeries. If you search about these issues, you'll not know anything. You don't have anyone to talk with to, to understand, or to make someone like you to, to know how to fight this issue. I was feeling very sad and very bad feelings, but this feeling still gave me power to find the way.

It started with fear feeling and I was scared to do something bad. I used to think it's a religious issue and if God accept this or not. If I was correct or not. Then I tried to find a way why I am like this. Why I feel like a man. I did some tests, and all analysis says, 'You are this man. You are a man.' And I know I have to prove myself. I have to be myself.

There is a solution.

I will live.

What is inside will come out and I will be this person. No matter how it cost me, I will be this person.

No one helped me; no support feeling, money, anything. I didn't find anyone to say even one word. I thought maybe few people, not all the people, but few people will support me by feelings, by saying. But no one did this. This was hard. I feel bad feeling when I remember. It's not expected. Even if they are 10 person, two person, even one person hear you, it's important. But at this time, I didn't have anyone. Even so, I decided to take a step and save money and do everything by myself. I went, I'm just going to do this. And even though my father is confused and my brothers, I'm going to do this.

I'm strong. I can do this. Step by step, step by step. And even now this feeling of I'm strong is coming bigger and bigger every day. I see birds flying between trees and they are free.

I'm thinking, I would like to be like this bird, be free. Not in a cage.

Free.

Up until today I still think about how to prove to my family, the people from my country, that I'm a successful person. You thought I damaged my life by this way, that I choose to be a man. Asking me: Who you can marry? What work can you do? You can't be successful. But I will prove to you I'm successful. I trust myself. I will be show you how much I be successful. I say to myself, I'm the man of impossible things.

I learned this skill from reading. In my early life I spent a lot of time, more than you can think, reading. I learned how to deal with problems and how to be patient. From Che Guevara I learned how he deal with the challenges of losing my home and my country. Like him, I came from a hard life and search for a safe place and went to different countries to find a safe life. How to be strong; if I have a challenge, I will face this challenge and I will achieve myself. I will do it, whatever it takes me. I'll do it. I believe in myself.

If I have a challenge, I will face this challenge and I will achieve myself. I will do it, whatever it takes me. I'll do it.

Our journeys have been long,
and we have followed many
different paths.

Each one of our paths is important
and each of our many roads has
helped us be who we are and
who we are still becoming.

Faith carries me all the way through

I live my values.

I've been brought up with faith and that's how it works in my family. And I have never gone away from me. I stick to that all the time. And my belief is very strong in my heart. With all the obstacles I stay in a space of faith. I do my morning prayers and ask for strength, ask for knowledge and at a personal level this has carried me through to where I am today. My faith carries me all the way through. I was brought up to do this. My family and my culture are all faith-based. Even though I fall short of His glory I try to do the right thing. If I put a smile on someone's face this is my church. I believe my faith can move mountains.

For me, it's culture and my core values from my country: Fefaka'apa'apa'aki (mutual respect), Feveitokai'aki (sharing, cooperating and fulfilment of mutual obligations), Lototoo (humility and generosity) and Tauhi vaha'a (loyalty and commitment). And even though there are big differences between me and my family I still respect these values and am supported by them. I live my values.

Culture is really important. It plays a very important role in my life. Even though I have differences between me and other people, but I still keep that. I respect them for who they are, despite the differences we have.

In Malaysia, the parents, the culture, the religion, the belief, the pride and everything surrounding them think who I am is wrong. They lock you up. They beat you up. They're trying to give you a medicine. They take you to black magic. I go through that. And when I'm on my way to go my surgery, I would never know if I was going come back alive. Even so, I carry the value of my father. He is a person full of pride; to have a better source of work, better source of income, work in a professional way and put out myself and the truth is I don't want to hurt them again. I'm already hurt them by changing myself to who I want to be. They didn't want me to be this. And in the end, today, as long as I'm very far away, they can say, 'It's ok whatever you do, provided you're happy.' They say that as long as they have the distance.

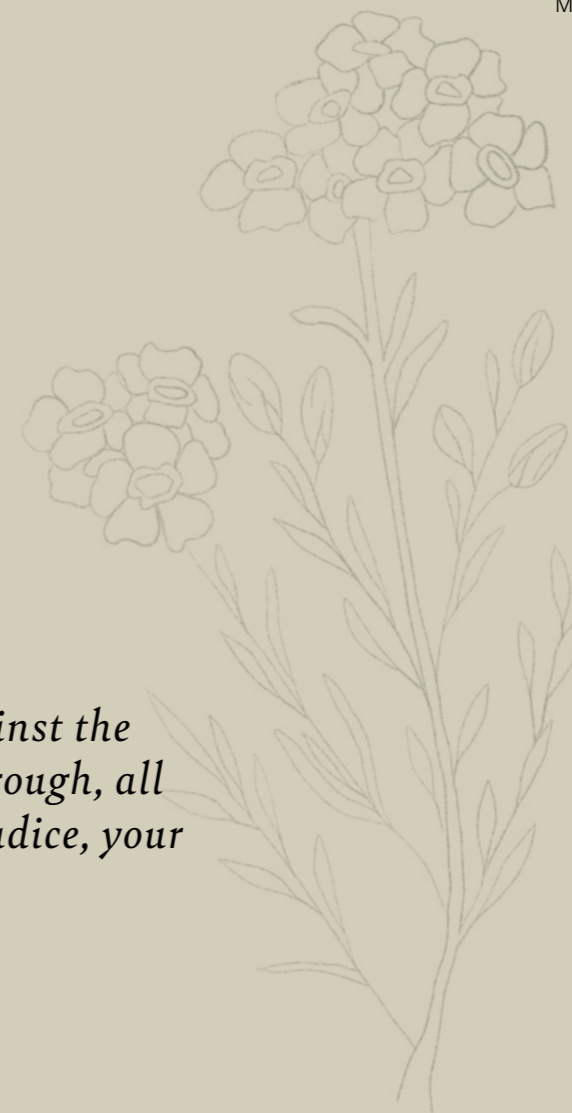
Stories told in response

Faith can be put in you stronger against the struggle that you face. All you go through, all the humiliation, the shame, the prejudice, your faith can put you stronger.

Faith is a big thing. Whatever you do, whatever you see, whatever you wanted, faith is in every single thing. Even you want to find your partner, there's a faith. Faith design the destiny. The faith that you have in yourself leads you to your destiny, and you can have faith in every single thing that you're doing. Faith can be put in you stronger against the struggle that you face. All you go through, all the humiliation, the shame, the prejudice, your faith can put you stronger.

For some people, traditional faith is not the thing for them. For some people, faith is the thing, and for some people, it's culture, and for some people, maybe something else. Faith is what you believe in. You can believe in humanity and that is your faith. You can believe in kindness and that's your faith. In nature. In black magic. Faith is personal. Be myself, myself and in myself. I love that faith in myself.

Even with the culture, there are so many things about my culture that I don't like, and I try to grow out of them. There are parts I want and parts I don't take. I want to take generosity, hospitality, and I do love that. Feeding people. That's the one. I love to feed people. I don't want to take prejudice, the idea that they know everything, and they are right and everybody else is wrong. They don't criticise their own beliefs and ideas and thought, so they're stuck. I take what I want, leave the rest. You don't need to follow what your parents and your culture; sometimes you need to choose your own values.



Singing, dancing

We all need good times,

When I was young, I loved to sing. My mum's brother used to shout at me, 'Stop being a girl; your singing is bad'. But singing is one way of telling my story. They say trans women can't sing, but I do karaoke and I'm amazing. This is my talent, and I will make use of it. Sometimes I think, the song, it's not mine and I don't really have the right for it. But I sing it for other people to know that I can, as a transgender woman, I can. That's why I always, always love to, to sing karaoke. I do it for me and for all of us and you can too.

You don't have to listen to what people say. You know, when sadness comes, I turn on the music. Whatever it is you do for happiness, do it. We get there.

Some of us love to dance, even we sing for ourselves while we dance. Today at lunch we were dancing, and it was good.

We love to walk and to meet people. It can be boring here but we try to go to places and see the sun at the end of the day, drink coffee and try to find a way to change our mood if it is down. In our country it was easier, we didn't feel bored, but we weren't safe. So, we try to make life worth living. We all need good times, even if it's just sitting on our balcony together.

Stories told in response

*As a grown man I can dance
it in front of everybody else,
but I still do it at home because
I can, because I like it.*

It wasn't about singing, for me. It was about dancing. I love to dance in a feminine way. I always got into trouble for it. When they talk about stopping, for me, it was stop being a girl. All the time they said it. What I did was to dance by myself. When nobody's watching I still do it in my room. I close the door. As a grown man I can dance it in front of everybody else, but I still do it at home because I can, because I like it.

I think everyone go through that. I used to fold clothing, very neatly, and clean the house. My mother says like, 'Don't do that. There's the female work. Don't do that'. You know, every single time, 'Don't do that, don't do that.' But that's your joy, you and that's your femininity, and doing it is a magical happy moment.

Friendship and joy matter.



Messages to LGBTIQ+ people with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds

*We can give each other strength.
When one rises all of us rises.
Like the Phoenix.*

We want to tell LGBTIQ+ people from
refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds

Be true to oneself

Be proud of who you are
We are all smart and unique and different

We can leave our bad experiences behind

We look forward together

We are strong by each other

Support is possible

Just say to yourself and feel what is inside you.

You will feel it when you just trust yourself.

Those years of pain have passed, and you have
been successful. You got through them. You will
go through this trouble as well. It's bittersweet.
You remember the traumas, you remember
everything, and then you realise: I have seen the
other side of them. I will see the other side of this.

The Phoenix is born from the ashes. If you look
at our journeys, we have risen from our ashes
when we came to Australia. That bird doesn't
die; when the bird gets to a very bad situation,
it burns and then rises up again. You cannot kill
it. It just keeps coming back and coming back,
coming back. And when they do a drawing of
the Phoenix, what they usually do is they have
flames like this and then the bird coming out
and the bird is really beautiful. You can't kill the
Phoenix. It doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt the
Phoenix to have the difficult time, but it rises.

Keeps on rising

Like us.

Hearing from you – Outsider witnessing

In this document we have shared some of
our experiences and some of the ways we
have stood up to hardship. We would love to
hear your responses to our words. Below are
suggested questions you might think about when
responding. Responses will be incorporated into
the document, if that's something you'd like.
Or they can be confidential and shared privately
with the group.

We really value your witnessing and being
with us on this journey.

What particular words or phrases struck you?

What images came to mind about
what was important for you?

What is it about your life that meant
these images came to mind?

What has been confirmed for you by making
this connection with these words and stories?

What difference will remembering
this make in your own life?

Please mail to:
STARTTS LGBTIQ+ Project
152/168 The Horsley Dr
Carramar NSW 2163

Or email to:
Heather.Jones1@health.nsw.gov.au

STARTTS

The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) works to improve the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people through its delivery of peer-led support groups, as well as training on inclusive practice strategies.

Understanding and responding to the intersectionality between sexuality, gender, bodies, cultural background, experiences of trauma, and mental health and wellbeing, is a focus of these initiatives.

STARTTS is a state-wide service funded by the NSW Department of Health and Commonwealth Department of Health to provide high quality assessment, treatment and rehabilitation services to people living in NSW who have experienced organised violence or trauma associated with the refugee experience. STARTTS is an Affiliated Health Organisation (AHO), a Non-Government Organisation whose services are deemed to be part of the NSW public health system.

STARTTS' service provision philosophy is predicated on a bio-psycho-social framework that incorporates a large range of clinical and psycho-social interventions informed by the latest advances in neuroscience and evidence-based practice in relevant fields. As such, STARTTS provides a broad range of services including assessment; counselling for all age groups; psychiatric assessment and interventions; family therapy; group interventions; body-focused interventions such as massage, physiotherapy, acupuncture and pain management groups; support groups; programs for children and youth; and various strategies to increase the capacity of support networks and refugee communities to sustain their members.

The focus of the STARTTS' approach is on building capacity and empowering people and communities to take control over their own lives, using a strengths-based approach and building on individual, family, community and cultural strengths.

Acknowledgments

This document is made by the STARTTS LGBTIQ+ group. The people that created this work shared their hearts and their stories. Many prefer to be anonymous for reasons which are clear. Sharing these stories required courage; it meant people remembered many things they have wanted to forget. It was not easy. There was sadness and pain, but we deeply appreciate the sharing of lives. There was also laughter, generosity, and community. As one of us says, 'It takes many of us to paddle this boat.'

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