



# GENDER GENOGRAMS

A resource for the families  
of older Trans and Gender  
Diverse people.

Being **Trans** or  
**Gender Diverse** is not  
a mental illness and  
many governments  
and services are  
working to right the  
past wrongs...

# Foreword

## Ro Allen

For many of us, families are the most important relationships in our lives. Often our family knows and loves us like no one else does. We have a history together. We go through highs and lows and we work through tough times. At the end of the day we recognise our differences and focus on what we have in common; that's what makes us strong.

The love and support of family is incredibly important for older Trans and Gender Diverse people. As increasing numbers of older people live out their gender diversity as older people – we need to support family members to adjust to these changes.

A Gender Genogram is a resource for family members to take to Family Relationship services to work through these changes. This matters because successful families support Trans and Gender Diverse family members.



**Ro Allen**  
Gender and Sexuality Commissioner

## Dr Ruth McNair

Our understanding of Trans and Gender Diverse people has shifted significantly. Historically, gender diversity was considered to be an illness that needed to be cured. As a result, many Trans and Gender Diverse people have experienced abuse and discrimination; and have poorer mental health than the broader community.

But we now know that we were wrong. Being Trans or Gender Diverse is not a mental illness and many governments and services are working to right the past wrongs that traumatised Trans and Gender Diverse people.

One important reform is working with families to promote respectful relationships. This resource can assist in that. Genograms are used in Family Therapy and by GPs, social workers, psychologists and counsellors and using a Gender Genogram approach could support families to adjust to changes when an older family member changes the way they express their gender. Gender Genograms are also very useful for health providers to truly understand the person and how they perceive themselves and their close relationships



**Dr Ruth McNair**  
General Practitioner

## ***Introduction***

This resource was produced for the families of older Trans and Gender Diverse (TGD) people. It was developed as part of the Kinfolk Project, which was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health, Australia to increase older TGD people's choices and control over their gender expression.

The resource recognises that changes to gender identity or expression as an older person can impact on relationships with intimate partners, siblings, children and grandchildren. Families play such important roles in our lives, and for many older TGD people who change their gender identity or gender expression, there is a strong desire to maintain good relationships with their families. One strategy to achieve this is through the exploration of gender roles and expectations in families, giving insights which can help to manage the shifting dynamics of gender within the family.

This resource begins by outlining definitions of gender and the gender binary. These terms provide a useful context for understanding the gaps between the messages many of us were taught about gender when we were children; and the reality of the gender diverse world we now live in.

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*The gender binary is now contested in many Western cultures, with increasing recognition that some people are Transgender (Trans) or gender diverse.*

## **Understanding gender**

The World Health Organisation (2019) defines gender as a social construct; or a set of gender roles and expectations that are developed by society. In other words, gender is about commonly held values and beliefs, rather than physical bodies. Many Western countries have held binary views of gender; that is, beliefs that all people can be neatly categorized into either male or female. A binary perspective often includes rigid views about the ways men and women were expected to look, think and act. For example, men may be encouraged to be strong, courageous, independent, assertive and unemotional. While women may be encouraged to be gentle, sensitive, caring, submissive and dependent. In reality, many people have characteristics from both of these gender categories.

The gender binary is now contested in many Western cultures, with increasing recognition that some people are Transgender (Trans) or gender diverse. The word Trans is often used to refer to people who were assigned a sex (male or female) at birth, on the basis of their genitals, that does not reflect how they view their gender. Trans people may transition from male to female, or female to male, or identify as gender diverse (ie: not exclusively male or female). While there are significant numbers of young TGD people now, there are also increasing numbers of people who discover their gender diversity in their middle or old age.

## Transitioning late

The current generation of older people has grown up with limited choices regarding the expression of their gender outside the binary. Research shows that some older people who had inklings of their gender diversity early on, knew that disclosure could result in imprisonment or attempted 'cures' such as shock therapy etc. This was highlighted by Sandy, an older Trans woman, who shared her story of growing up and transitioning late in life as part of a research report called *Gender is just part of who I am* (Latham and Barrett, 2015) Sandy reflected that:

*I tried very hard to fit in with society. My parents knew [about my gender diversity] ... from a very early age. My father tried to have me cured ...with psychiatric and electro convulsive therapy. ...I got married three times, had four children, tried very hard to be normal. I became a body builder at the request of some of my psychiatrists, they decided if I made the perfect male body, I would be more happy with it (Latham and Barrett, 2015 p. 13)*

**For many, knowing it was unsafe to express their gender diversity meant repressing their gender differences.** This was emphasised by Jeanine, an older Trans woman who described this repression using the following metaphor:

*... it's like being in a house and you have this room that you never quite enter. Or you do enter it at times but then it's shut off and you don't go back in there again. I considered this a part of my life, meaning this room that I just didn't enter. I knew that it was there but most of the time I tried to just shut it out (Latham and Barrett, 2015, p. 16)*

The current availability of information on gender diversity has resulted in some older people realising they have subconsciously repressed their gender diversity. This was highlighted by Beatrice, an older Trans woman who talked about a lifetime of gender binary conditioning when she noted:

*I'm almost 67 and I didn't understand anything about the Trans world until four years ago. That's been a pretty huge leap for me, overcoming a lifetime of conditioning. When I look back there were tell-tale signs along the way that I never linked to...the way I am in life (Latham and Barrett, 2015, p. 1)*

As Beatrice and other older people explore their gender diversity in later life, they may face restrictions to their newfound gender expression by family members and service providers who hold binary views of gender (Barrett et al, 2009; Latham and Barrett, 2015; Crameri et al., 2015; Barrett, 2008). Older TGD people may comply with these restrictions in order to preserve family relationships, and maintain services, however this may result in a decrease in mental wellbeing (Latham and Barrett, 2015).

**There are currently no resources in Australia to assist the families of older people who change the way they express their gender in later life. The Kinfolk Project was established to address this gap.**

# The Kinfolk Project

The Kinfolk project involved a survey and interviews with older TGD people and their families, as well as workshops with family relationship services and aged care service providers. The research included Trans women and gender diverse people, however we were unable to recruit any Trans men to participate. A suite of resources was developed (see: [alicesgarage.net/kinfolk](http://alicesgarage.net/kinfolk)) that includes the following:

- **Our Authentic selves:** a print and film resource and education module for aged care service providers on how to promote Dignity and Choice for older TGD people accessing aged care services
- **Ripplegram:** a resource for older TGD people to plan for the consequences of changing gender expression
- **Gender Genograms:** a resource for mapping gender roles and expectations in families
- **The Kinfolk Report:** the overall report on the project.

This resource presents a Gender Genogram for families to map gender roles and expectations in their family. This process is designed to support families where an older member is transitioning or changing gender expression. The map is an important part of the process of understanding how to adjust to changes in gender expression.

The Kinfolk project team included: Dr Catherine Barrett, Kaye Bradshaw and Toni Paynter, Sally Conning and Kathy Mansfield. Three members of the project team were older TGD people, which was critical to the success and authenticity of the project.

## How to use this resource

This resource includes three key sections. The following section covers critical information for families that was identified in survey and interviews with older TGD people and family members. It is not intended to be a prescriptive list, rather it is a starting point for conversation. Then, the process for completing a Gender Genogram is outlined and two examples are presented; one by a family member and the other by an older TGD person. Finally, links for further information are provided.

This document is not intended as a stand-alone resource, rather as something that families of older TGD people could take to their local family relationship services as a starting point for working through challenges.

**Alice's Garage, Melbourne.**

**Available from: [alicesgarage.net/kinfolk](http://alicesgarage.net/kinfolk)**

# Critical information for families

In surveys, interviews and workshops, participants identified 12 critical pieces of information that they wanted family members to understand:

1. Historical violence and discrimination against TGD people has resulted in some older TGD people subconsciously repressing their gender diversity
2. For some older TGD people, repression of gender diversity has resulted in depression, anxiety and substance abuse, which has negatively impacted on family relationships
3. The provision of information on gender diversity has led to increasing numbers of older people recognising and expressing their gender diversity
4. Significant legislative and policy reform has taken place to promote equality for TGD people. A small number of very vocal transphobic protests have been well publicised and may lead families to feel ashamed of TGD family members. People who are gender diverse are worthy human beings and deserve to be valued and respected.
5. Older TGD people who transition or change the way they express their gender are fundamentally the same person, with the same values and beliefs and want to be loved and to be able to express love beyond their gender
6. It may be useful for family members to meet other TGD people to demystify gender diversity and to understand that TGD people are worthy human beings who make significant contributions to society
7. Some older TGD people internalise the transphobic views of the world around them and may feel less worthy as a result of acknowledging their gender diversity
8. Some older TGD people who have waited a lifetime to express their gender diversity may feel driven to make immediate changes to their gender expression. However, it may be important to make changes slowly, to allow family members time to adjust
9. Transitioning in longstanding relationships may present a significant challenge. It may be useful for older TGD people and their family members to work with family relationship services to identify and plan for the intended and unintended consequences of changing gender expression (see RippleGram document on Kinfolk webpage for more information)
10. It may be useful to provide information to families about the legal rights of TGD people to gender expression
11. It may be useful to work with family relationships services to talk about family hopes and dreams and whether the paths to achieving these dreams needs to be adjusted
12. Completing a Gender Genogram (see following pages), with a family relationship service may assist in identifying the gender roles and expectations in families and how these can be adjusted when a family member changes the way they express their gender.

***Many of the points listed above address the historical belief that all people fit neatly into a gender binary, and that any gender expression outside of the binary presents a threat. However, this 'threatened' viewpoint is reducing as our understanding of gender diversity grows. It is expected that in the future there will be little need for a resource like this; but, until then, we offer this resource as a strategy to build successful family relationships.***

# Gender Genograms

*This resource presents two Gender Genograms, as examples of the potential to utilise this approach to explore gender roles and expectations in families.*

A genogram is like a family tree; it shows a person's family relationships and also includes their emotional and social connections. Genograms are used in social work, psychology and family therapy to explore family dynamics. They can help to show how family members relate to each other and bond. Genograms are drawn using symbols; and symbols for gender are limited to circles for females and squares for men. In the USA, the Multicultural Family Institute has developed a process for LGBTIQ inclusivity in genograms, which includes symbols for TGD people. However, to date the genogram approach has not been utilised to explore gender roles and expectations in ways that support family members of older TGD people or TGD people more broadly.

To address this gap, the Kinfolk team developed a Gender Genogram concept. It expands the traditional approach to genograms by focusing on the gender roles and expectations of every family member. In this way we acknowledge that gender is something everyone has; rather than just something to focus on when a person is gender diverse. A Gender Genogram can be a useful way of opening up conversations about 'the way gender works' in families and how this can shift when an older person changes the way they express their gender.

On the following pages we present two examples of Gender Genograms, one completed by a Trans woman and the other by the wife of a Trans woman. For each Genogram we invited the participants to draw their family tree using a square symbol for males, circle for females and triangle for TGD people. As participants drew their Gender Genogram they were invited to describe what they were drawing and the way each family member expressed their gender.

*There is no right or wrong way to draw or describe a Gender Genogram; but here are some of the steps we invited participants to take:*

1. You are invited to draw your family tree; include anyone you would like to include
2. Draw each person's gender using square for males, circle for females, triangle for TGD people; or any other symbol you like. Use any colour you like
3. Please tell me what you are drawing while you are drawing it; or after you have drawn it
4. For each family member you have drawn, can you please describe their gender or the way they express their gender?

The scope of the current project did not extend to exploring interpersonal relationships and any changes to the way gender was expressed following transition. However, this may be a useful focus in family therapy to assist older TGD people and their families understand and adjust to changes.

**Family members (and older TGD people) reading this resource are invited to print and take it with them to the Family Relationship service to work through it.**

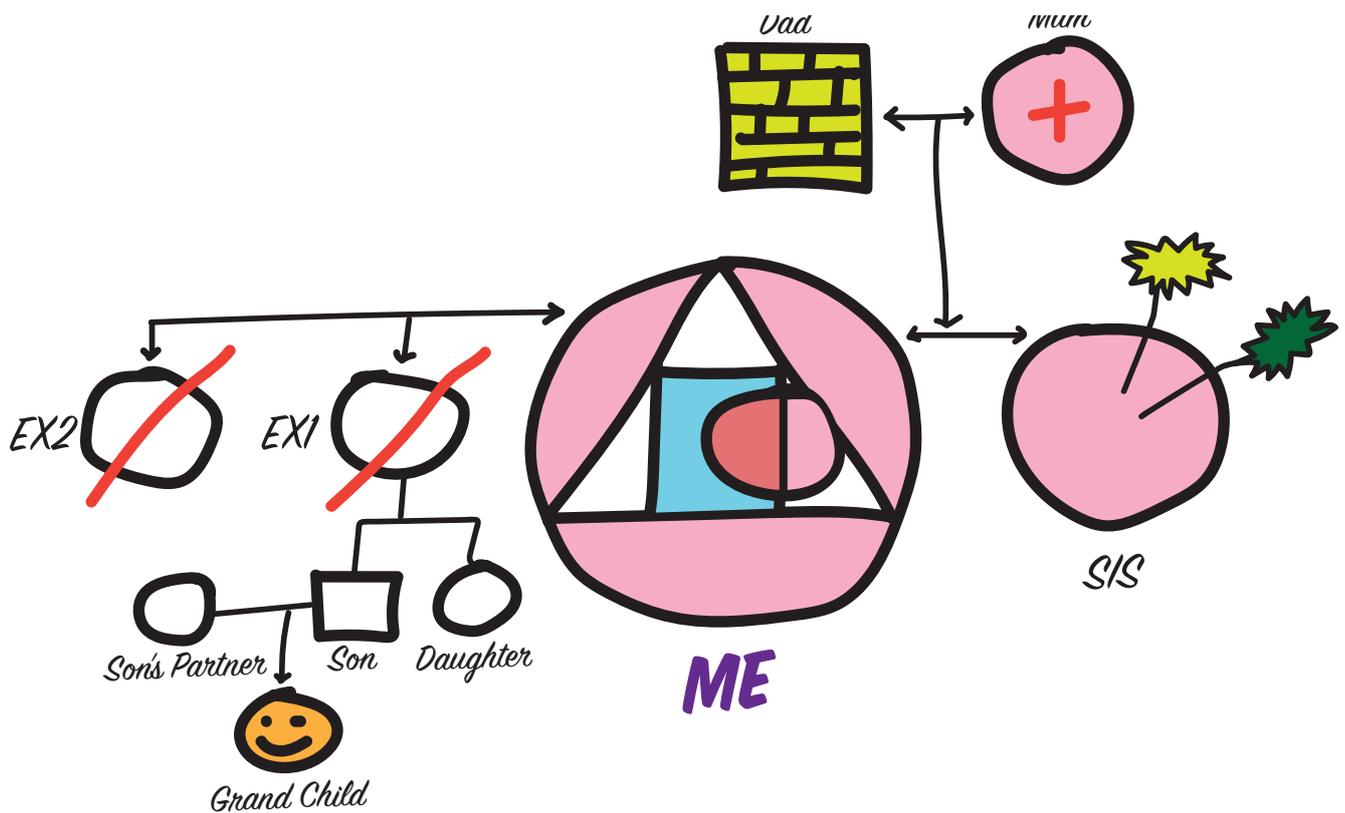
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*The message I got from school and society was that I was a male and I should be doing male things. There were two genders; you got one or the other.*

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# Ellie's

## Gender Genogram



When I was a kid, I was expected to do the boy stuff like mowing lawns and getting fire wood.

My sister did girls' stuff, mostly inside the house. I know she had a cat that she used to dress up and push around in a little pram. She was very girly. Typical 50s attire for a girl; frilly skirts, black patent shoes, white ankle socks, twin set. In the 60s she would antagonise me, and I would chase her around the dining table and when I caught her I would thump her on the arm and she would wail and yell "he hit me, he hit me." And mum or dad would come out and yell at me for hitting my sister.

**My sister was girly and had boyfriends and expressed her gender in traditional ways**, in the sense for that era. But she has blossomed and has since had a female partner and is living the life she wanted. That puts her outside the beige box as well; the beige box is the way that women are expected to behave.

The message I got from school and society was that I was a male and I should be doing male things. There were two genders; you got one or the other. Gender wasn't really talked about; you were just expected to be one or the other and I was handed the boy identity. I was expected to do male things like helping with the gardening. At school, boys played footy or tag or other games like that. The girls were segregated, they used a different part of the playground and played different games.

This Gender Genogram was developed by Ellie, a Trans Woman in her late sixties.

I drew myself as a circle first; I'm a woman. But there's a square under there. And then in later life there was a triangle; Trans. I'm fully female, where I should be. I identify as female with a trans history.

**When I was a kid, I was expected to do the boy stuff like mowing lawns and getting fire wood.**

All the while this was happening, I had a secret. I used to dress in my sister's clothes. I was very conscious of what the girls were wearing at school. I didn't know what it meant; I just knew I needed to do it. I used to get really tense and the pressure would build up and then I would dress in her clothes and the pressure valve would release and I would feel good again. I knew I was different, and I felt I was alone. I thought I was the only one. I got caught a couple of times and, from the response of my parents, I knew this was not acceptable behaviour for a boy. It was swept under the carpet, but I was also given the fairly strong message that it was not on.

**My dad was the great provider.** He went to work. He was the sole income earner. Everything had a place. Immaculately dressed, never a hair out of place. He went to war in his twenties and was flying around in a Sunderland looking for U boats. I think the air force helped him be the pedantic person he became. He was a brick wall. Saturday afternoon he would polish his shoes for the week. He might have taken the garbage cans out. I remember mum in the kitchen and dad in the dining room reading the paper.

**My mum was purely the fifties and sixties housewife.** Look after the kids. Make the school lunches. Make dad's lunch. Do the shopping. Prepare the meals. Do the dishes. Play nurse when someone was crook. She was very proud of who she was; married with two kids. She was a teacher at Sunday School, deeply involved in Church. She was confident, but all thumbs, awkward. Damn good cook.

## *In the eighties I was blokey with a marriage and two kids and a huge secret.*

I got a job in the late sixties as a technician in a blokey environment. I played the blokey role really well in the seventies with excess alcohol and drugs (heroin), surfing, partying hard and roaring around in fast cars that we modified ourselves. We did some stupid things in cars.

In the eighties I was blokey with a marriage and two kids and a huge secret. My wife was a surfer chick who became a good mum. She must have known I dressed, but it was never discussed. As the marriage started to fall apart, I

bought clothes and had a stash that I would wear when I could. I came home from work one day and she'd left me a note saying, "I found your stash of clothes, I'm leaving." There must have been more to it than that, but that was the reason she gave.

**Then I got married again and my second wife knew about my dressing.** We discussed it forever and then the rules changed, and she got harsher and harder. I wasn't allowed to dress unless she was in the house. She would booby trap my clothes. She would ring and check up on me. It was a very complicated relationship. Enough was enough and eventually I walked.

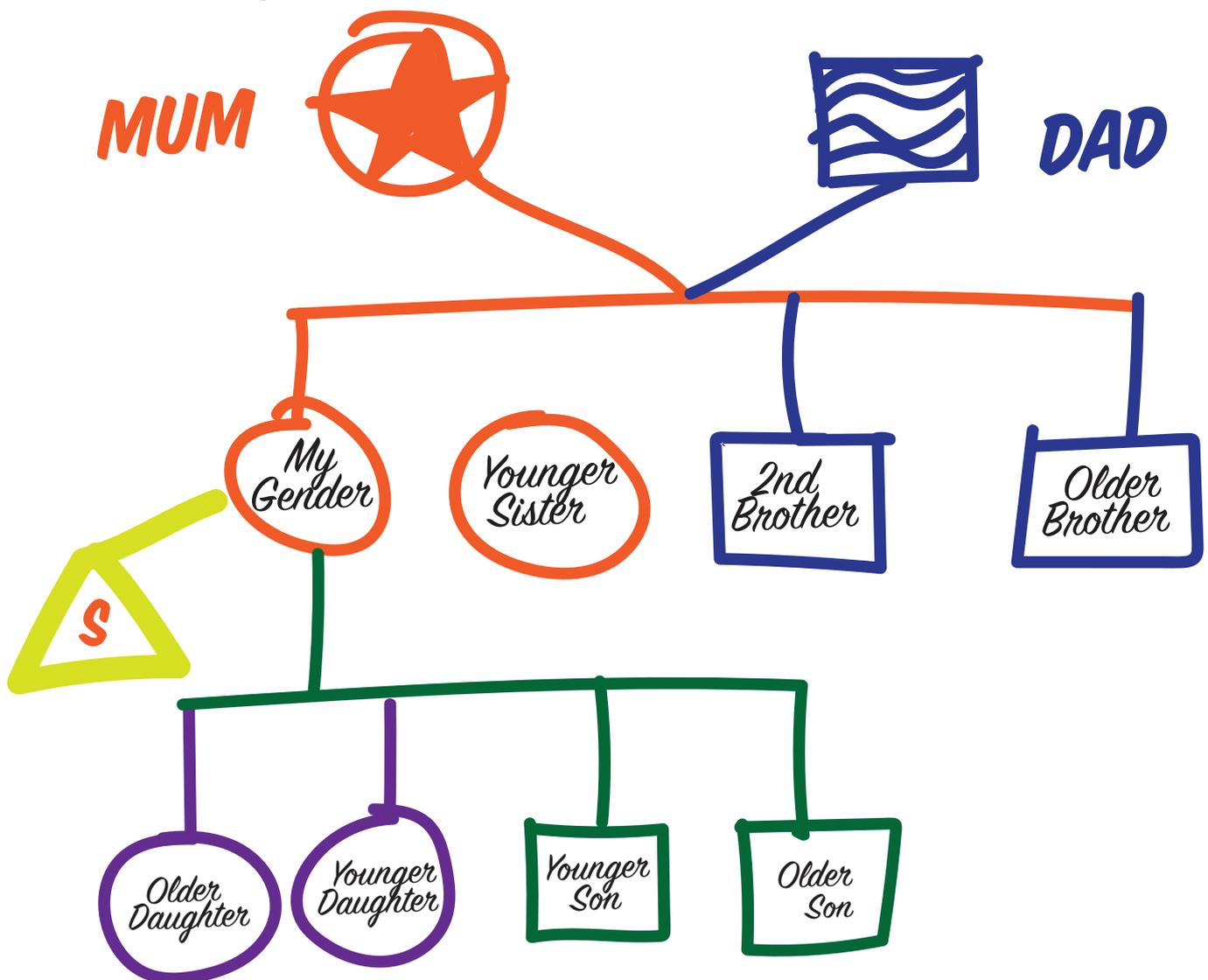
**I have two adult children.** My children and I don't communicate for other reasons other than that I am Ellie. My daughter's partner doesn't not acknowledge my gender.

A decade ago I ventured out in public for the first time. I've been on hormone therapy for eight years.

**My mum told me she didn't want to meet Ellie.** She died without ever meeting Ellie or knowing my full story. At mum's funeral my sister acknowledged there were two funerals – mum's and 'his'. That was the last time I ever had to dress as her son. I am living more and more as myself now. No more dual life. Here I am; Ellie forever.

# Leanne's

## Gender Genogram



This Gender Genogram was developed by Leanne, a woman in her seventies who is married to Shirley, a Transwoman.

**My dad liked to invent things and he liked to dance and play the piano.** He was an alcoholic; but they gave them cigarettes and alcohol during the war, maybe they thought it would numb things? Dad and his mates used to brew their own beer underneath their tent. He was hard working. He took on any jobs. He was a caretaker at the local school, which suited him because he would put the coal in the boiler at 6am and then he was off work till 3pm when he had to come back and sweep and clean up after the kids. He was a furniture polisher. He polished Grand Pianos and coffins. He was quite different. In the war he did truck driving. I would draw him in the Gender Genogram as a wavy line.

**My mum was a dress maker and she also designed clothing as well.** She was very inventive. We would go to dance classes and she would make our costumes. She was a frilly person. I drew her as a star; she liked to be the centre of attention. She was also a person who took charge. We were a family of four, so it was a busy household. Dad would help her to do the laundry and wash the dishes after dinner. The 1950s was about women being in the kitchen; but mum and dad did it differently. Mum and dad like to go out

dancing.

**My brothers were born before the war.** My oldest brother was out there to be different from mum and dad. He was a bit of a rebel. He was the Elvis Presley of the time; he was a wild child. When the policeman knocked on the door ... mum and dad were a bit cross with him. He had some dubious friends. He married a strict church going Lady, which always made us laugh. He was reformed. He used to drink copious quantities of everything and now he drinks nothing.

**My younger brother was everyone's friend and he was a person everyone was drawn to.** He had lots of girlfriends. He was an engineer who loved to use his hands. He married and had two daughters; they are both Ballerinas and so are their children. So, he didn't get to pass on his mechanical skills. He would have liked to have had a boy to pass those skills on to. He is always making things for us; I think he feels it is a lost art.

**My sister was pretty clever;** she could have become a chemist, but she became a teacher. My mother said she taught her dolls, she would line them up and teach them, so it wasn't a surprise that she became a teacher. She is a very pedantic person and a bit up and down in her temperament. She gets depression. She is a very clever lady. With her hands she makes those origami cards and intricate icing for cakes.

**My gender?** I am a sewing nut. I do a lot of embroidery; it has come down through the family that way. Even my daughter sews. I was on the farm for a long time with Shirley, my wife. It was hard work, I had to chop my own wood and milk goats. We had sheep and cattle and they all had to be fed. I enjoyed it when I was fit enough, but after a while the wood chopping was a bit hard on my back and hands. It was a good life for our kids though. If we had poorly lambs, I would bring them in and feed them every two hours over night to keep them going.

**My wife, Shirley was always inventive, and we've been a good partnership in that she would help me with everything we needed to do.** There were times she wasn't there because she had meetings and committees, she was an active community member and sometimes that would work for me and sometimes it wouldn't. Shirley would do a lot of jobs outside on the weekend, she would milk the cow and cut up wood; everyone had to cut up wood for the fire to keep the hot water going. I would do a lot of cooking and cleaning ... we seemed to divide things up and support each other.

**My oldest daughter was like a mini activist.** When she didn't like something, she would go and do something about it. She protested Watership Down because it was bad for the rabbits when she was 10. She was quite outspoken. She did four university degrees, but she wasn't very organised; she was always running to exams at the last minute. She liked singing and shows and all that. She talked Shirley into auditioning for musicals.

**My second daughter was always our clever rider, we had horses.** She was a more scientific type brain. She did agricultural degree. She is an organiser. She's on a farm now with three children and manages to keep the family going. She is very pragmatic in what she does. She likes the girls to be dressed as girls, but she really is an outdoors person.

***My oldest son didn't do any University degrees.***

He was just average and got disinterested in school at 15 and so, in the end, we took him out of school. He did farming jobs for a while and then met his first wife and did computer courses and now he is into IT and does a lot of jobs in IT. He is a father of three lovely daughters and they are all very clever too. He has a very angry streak and it is very hard to calm him down sometimes. He has remarried a lovely lady and they have seven children between them.

***My youngest son is a calm sort of person, nothing phases him.***

He is married to a lady and they have two children and I think he is very happy. He has been doing a science degree for about 10 years, but he reckons he will get there in the end. Because he has a scientific mind he is more of a boy than anything else, but he is very laid back.

In my relationship with Shirley I can't see that it has changed a lot. I find that Shirley flip flops from one thing to the other. She wants to be a girl, but if anyone has a problem with something, she has to fix it and have an engineering overview to fixing things; it's a very masculine trait. That just shows up a real male trait; she gets surprised when I tell her that. It's not that I wished she didn't do it; I know that it is harking back to where she started. I know that she gets annoyed with herself, but I say to her that you can't just wipe out 60 years of behaviour. It's not annoying, it's just interesting to me. The two behaviours seem to go along beside each other. Like if she does the dishes, she wants me to give her an elephant stamp for doing them. I've been doing them all my life; I'm not passing out elephant stamps.

***Our relationship in the here and now is a great thing as we move forward in our older age, we balance our individual personalities to blend our needs. It is an ongoing thing that keeps on evolving over time.***

*Our relationship in the here and now is a great thing as we move forward in our older age, we balance our individual personalities to blend our needs. It is an ongoing thing that keeps on evolving over time.*

## **Conclusion**

The Gender Genograms are intended as a starting point for conversations about how gender works in a family and how the family can adapt to changes in gender roles and expectations. Ellie reflected on the two 'failed marriages' in her Gender Genogram as evidence of the importance of communication about gender. The importance of adapting to change was also highlighted in Leanne's Gender Genogram.

We hope that family members, and older TGD people, will take this resource to Family Relationships or counselling services to explore what gender means in their family. With the support of professional services, families of older TGD people can identify strategies to adapt to change and potentially make their family stronger.

## More Information

**Project webpage:** the project webpage includes the other resources from the project and links to support services. Check it at: [alicesgarage.net/kinfolk](http://alicesgarage.net/kinfolk)

**Family relationship services:** in every state and territory there are family relationships services that can assist you to complete a Gender Genogram. These include Relationships Australia, see: [relationships.org.au](http://relationships.org.au)

**Immediate support:** if you need to talk to someone immediately and you are not sure what your options are 1800RESPECT is a website and 24 hour support service that offers counselling and information about support services.

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