

Commemorating International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia

No need to fear difference

Millions of people around the world are today celebrating the ninth annual International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO). May 17th was chosen as it commemorates the decision by the World Health Organisation in 1990 to take homosexuality out of the list of mental disorders. The Day provides an annual focus for action for thousands of human rights activists in more than 90 countries.

Homophobia is the irrational hatred, intolerance, and fear of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people. These negative feelings fuel the myths, stereotypes and discrimination and can also lead to violence against LGB people. LGB people brought up in a homophobic society can often internalise these negative stereotypes and develop varying degrees of low self-esteem and self-hatred. Examples of homophobic behaviour can include offensive jokes, language, innuendo and mockery; insulting or abusive behaviour and gestures, deliberate exclusion from conversation and professional and social activity; physical threats and assault.

Transphobia refers to various kinds of aversions towards transsexuality and transsexual or transgendered people. Transphobic bullying occurs when people are bullied due to their gender identity, their perceived gender identity or because they do not conform to culturally conventional gender roles. Trans is an umbrella term that describes people whose sense of gender or gender identity is seen as being different to typical gender norms. Therefore, transphobia often takes the form of refusal to accept a person's new gender expression. Whether intentional or not, transphobia can have severe consequences for the targeted person. Like other forms of discrimination, the discriminatory or intolerant behaviour can be direct (e.g. harassment, assault) or indirect (e.g. refusing to take steps to ensure that transgender people are treated in the same way as heterosexuals).

Homo-transphobic bullying in schools

Such bullying may be directed against and perpetrated by any member of the school community, including staff, pupils and parents/carers. Beyond the terrible impact bullying has on the children and students who are perceived as different, it creates generally unsafe, discriminatory, stigmatizing and violent school climates. Unsafe environments are bad for all students.

The psychological damages of such bullying, including low self-esteem, bear permanent marks on people's lives and can lead to self-harming conducts. It is therefore in the interest of all to reverse the situation.

Is homo-transphobia an issue in the workplace?

When discrimination in the workplace occurs, it leaves its victims facing uncomfortable work environments or even losing their jobs. Even if a person does not lose his/her job due to discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, the work environment could become very uncomfortable, or a worker could be denied opportunities for advancement that they deserve.

While in some cases discrimination is subtle and hard to notice, other signs of discrimination are overt. Some forms of discrimination which may occur on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity involve sudden and unwarranted firing, sudden and unwarranted cuts in pay rate, undue criticism or bullying, changes in benefits coverage and limits on advancement.

In inclusive organisations, LGBT individuals are able to be themselves, without fear of discrimination. In such atmospheres of acceptance and understanding, people are able to offer their full attention and energy to their work; whilst morale and productivity are high.

The work of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE)

Since the extension in its remit last year, the promotion of equality on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment as well as education and vocational training became an area covered by NCPE. To this end, persons who are discriminated against on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, education and vocational training can seek assistance from NCPE and can lodge a complaint with the Commission for further investigation.

NCPE also provides training on diversity, equality and non-discrimination to any entity, department or organisation which requests it. These sessions raise awareness on equality and related subject matters and sensitise the audience for an equal environment.

NCPE encourages anyone who feels discriminated against or who would like more information, to make contact on 2590 3850, on equality@gov.mt or through Facebook on 'National Commission for the Promotion of Equality'.

Tackling homo-transphobic bullying in schools

Schools can have:

- An anti-bullying policy addressing the issue of homo-transphobic bullying or harassment
- Peer counselling and listening
- Consistent application of rules and sanctions that are not discriminatory
- Inclusive sexual and relationship education
- Effective complaint procedures concerning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, or equality representatives

**Preventing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation / gender identity
in the workplace**

Employers can:

- Establish a policy promoting equality and train employees on this subject matter
- Hold diversity workshops to help send a message of tolerance in the workplace
- Assure that employees can file a complaint of discrimination / harassment without fear of retaliation
- Have effective disciplinary procedures in cases of harassment / discrimination
- Appoint equality representatives that are a point of reference in relation to equal treatment at the workplace

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