

Diversity at the workplace

“A colleague told me he respected me but thought I was abnormal ... in a few words, my sexual orientation was against nature in his opinion” - This is the experience of a 28-year old lesbian woman from Italy that was quoted in a 2012 survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). Such an experience is also a reality in Malta. In fact, 22% of the LGBT community that participated in this survey stated that they felt discriminated in the 12 months preceding the survey when looking for a job and/or at work because of being LGBT.

The *Equality for Men and Women Act* provides LGBT employees with legal protection from discrimination in employment. However, as indicated in a study carried out by NCPE in 2011, it is not uncommon for LGBT employees to encounter discrimination or bullying at work.

In this context, this year’s chosen theme for the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (May 17) is focusing on mental health and well being of the LGBT community who are at the heart of discrimination. This day aims to raise awareness on the need to cultivate diversity at the workplace to further enhances the mental health and well-being of both the employees and the employers themselves.

LGBT employees regularly have to decide if “coming out” in a particular work context will negatively impact their working lives. They fear the consequences of disclosure, which range from exclusion, bullying, harassment and, in extreme scenarios, physical violence or loss of employment.

We regularly share personal information with colleagues about our lives, on our sexual orientation, for example family situation, relationships, friends, fashion trends etc. Most heterosexual employees do not give the matter a second thought. However many LGBT employees may be afraid to disclose their sexual orientation because of previous experiences of having been discriminated or stigmatised.

This is also evident from the qualitative study that NCPE carried out in 2011. The findings indicated that coming out or being out at the place of work can still prove problematic. LGBT people are not free from harassment and discrimination in the workplace despite the comprehensive legislation in place. As revealed in this study, self-employed persons or those working in a family business may be at a lesser risk of harassment and discrimination from other employees. This is because they have a greater degree of control and authority over their careers and other employees.

LGBT employees are therefore more likely to disclose when workplaces are supportive of sexual orientation. Cultivating diversity at the workplace is not only the right thing to do – it also makes good business sense. For organisations, benefits of such diversity include the development of a creative and innovative workforce, attracting and retaining talent, increasing employee commitment and aligning employee and customers’ demographics. On

the other hand, the individual benefits from positive job satisfaction, effective organisational commitment, less stress and anxiety, and the ability to develop more positive relationships with colleagues. All people, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, and to merit and work output.

A successful diversity initiative on LGBT workplace issues has to include educating managers and colleagues on equal treatment on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. It has to provide them with helpful guidance so that they don't unconsciously offend others by assuming their sexual orientation, or by using inappropriate language.

To make every person in the workplace feel safe and valued, every other person in the workplace needs to be sensitised on how to make everyone feel appreciated as full and equal members of the team, irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Diversity training can help foster such a working environment. In this regard, NCPE provides training sessions to employers and employees on diversity, equality and non-discrimination. Such sessions raise awareness on equality and related areas and sensitise the audience on the need of a work environment based on equality for all individuals.

To create such an environment, NCPE encourages companies to implement an equality policy at the place of work and offers assistance in the drafting of such policy. In addition, persons who feel discriminated on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics or gender expression in employment can seek assistance from NCPE and lodge a complaint with the Commission for further investigation. Let us make the best use of this International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia to enhance dignity for all in our society.

For more information, contact NCPE on 2590 3850, equality@gov.mt or on Facebook.

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