

ENSURING INCLUSION, SAFETY & BELONGING FOR LGBTQIA+ STAFF AND COMMUNITIES

How We Got Here: Our Working Notes

Overview

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender, and “+” (LGBTQIA+) individuals are among those most at-risk of exclusion, discrimination, and violence in societies around the world. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community are often denied the legal rights, workplace protections, and personal freedoms that would enable them to achieve their full potential. While there has been some progress in securing substantial legal rights and recognition for the LGBTQIA+ community in some countries, the broad acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals remains uneven at best and significant challenges persist. LGBTQIA+ people experience widespread discrimination in both structural and individual ways. Therefore, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) working in the development and humanitarian spheres must consider how their support—or lack thereof—for LGBTQIA+ people relates to the individual, social, and structural barriers to inclusion.

These working notes on LGBTQIA+ issues focus on members of INGO staff who work in headquarters or overseas, as well as concerns that relate to external stakeholders. Given the nuances of individual situations and contexts, the phrase, “first do no harm” is an appropriate baseline guidance commonly used to prioritize individuals’ well-being. In order to do that, context and awareness of intersectional identities are particularly critical for work supporting and centering LGBTQIA+ staff and communities.

Impact

LGBTQIA+ people have always existed in every context and every society, yet even today, many are not able to live the lives of safety and dignity to which all people are entitled. As NGOs that aim to advance the health, safety, peace, and prosperity of all people and our planet, it is critical that policies, practices, and programs center and uplift LGBTQIA+ staff and communities and their distinct needs. While every context is different, below is an overview of key themes that organizations should consider in ensuring equity for and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people.

Follow a “do no harm” approach

The safety of staff and stakeholders is any organization’s most important responsibility. A “do no harm” approach means ensuring staff at headquarters and in field operations have the power to choose when, how, and if they are “out,” and how much information about their work is safe for them to disclose. For example, this might mean not requiring a colleague to travel to a country where their gender identity or sexual orientation could make them a target or feel unsafe. Likewise, if a staff member working overseas in a field office (regardless of origin, citizenship, etc.) comes out as LGBTQIA+ and feels they are unable to continue working in that context safely, their employer’s duty of care includes making sure protocols are in place to provide for their well-being. In all cases, organizations should develop policies, procedures, trainings, and briefings that support security and security awareness for staff regardless of whether they know people on their staff to be out as LGBTQIA+. At the program level, it is critical for INGOs to recognize

local LGBTQIA+ organizations and activists as a valuable resource and work with them to ensure that initiatives are not endangering LGBTQIA+ people.

Apply a “nothing about us without us” approach

It is an organization’s responsibility to be consultative and engage proactively with LGBTQIA+ staff, employee resource groups, and other organized spaces. If there are staff who are out, it is important to include them in decision-making about policies and practices. However, as with any other underrepresented group, LGBTQIA+ staff should not have to bear the burden of leading and educating the organization about their needs, nor should it be assumed that any out LGBTQIA+ staff inherently want to take on this work solely based on their LGBTQIA+ identity. Simply put, if designing a program that engages LGBTQIA+ people, organizations must do so in partnership with local groups and leaders, as well as willing LGBTQIA+ staff. Non-LGBTQIA+ staff members should actively seek to understand more about the challenges facing the community and what they can do to support their colleagues in the workplace. Staff members can:

- **Create a safe space within programs so that individuals do not feel pressured to out themselves.** This might mean that in situations where a potentially diverse group will be convening, facilitators must be clear about ground rules for engagement and participation and work toward creating a respectful, consent-driven safe space (e.g., agree that it is not appropriate to speculate about others’ identities privately or publicly).
- **Create norms for online communications and other practices.** Including pronouns in templates for email signatures and name placards for online meeting platforms (e.g., Zoom, WebEx, etc.) as a default practice can make LGBTQIA+ individuals feel more comfortable and included. That said, doing so should always be optional as requiring someone to disclose their gender pronouns can be dangerous in certain contexts.
- **Never assume that it is up to those in the organization who identify as LGBTQIA+ to ensure the organization observes specific occasions.** For some organizations, it may be customary or otherwise acceptable to celebrate or observe occasions like the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia; Transgender Day of Remembrance; etc. These observances are for everyone, and advocacy and allyship can and should come from anyone, including those who don’t identify as LGBTQIA+. LGBTQIA+ people may not want or have the capacity (emotional or otherwise) to take on this additional labor. It is also important that organizations not pressure or otherwise place LGBTQIA+ staff in a position where they are forced to discuss their experiences in a public way. Ultimately, the onus is on the organization to create an openly inclusive and supportive environment where LGBTQIA+ staff feel safe sharing and celebrating their full selves—if they so choose—and non-LGBTQIA+ staff are encouraged to show their allyship in concrete ways.

As part of its work to adopt and commit to a “nothing about us without us” approach, organizations must ensure that internal systems are set up to support the needs of LGBTQIA+ people. Supporting the unique needs of LGBTQIA+ staff at all levels across an organization means integrating them into operations and human resources (H.R.) practices. This can also involve correcting potential non-inclusive assumptions of cisgender and heterosexual identities for staff and their families within H.R. policies, benefits, data collection, physical office design, and other operations.

- LGBTQIA+ staff need to know they can obtain support within their organization from individuals who are already aware of and educated on the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ people in the workplace. Ideally, all members of an organization’s H.R. team should receive specialized professional development opportunities or training on LGBTQIA+ matters. However, at a minimum, there should be at least one H.R. staff member who is equipped and transparently recognized as a focal point to provide specific support to LGBTQIA+ staff. In addition, policies should set baseline expectations among staff to respect their colleagues’ pronouns and chosen names, and ensure that no protocols (inadvertently or otherwise) force staff to disclose their partnership, family status, or other identities.
- **Not all benefits packages are created equal.** There are important benefits specific to LGBTQIA+ people that are critical to their health and well-being. Given that LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to suffer from depression and other mental health conditions as a result of their social and cultural marginalization, low-to-zero cost access to mental health services is critical. Likewise, demanding that **gender affirming healthcare** is automatically part of healthcare benefits—rather than optional or available as an add-on—sends an important signal to not just LGBTQIA+ staff, but all employees. Other LGBTQIA+ inclusive healthcare benefits and policies might include: fertility support; ensuring that children of queer parents receive benefits regardless of adoption status (for example, if one partner in a queer couple births their child while the other is not genetically linked, ensure the parent who is not genetically linked is also able to claim that child as theirs); and prescription plans that cover medicines that prevent HIV infection (such as pre-exposure or post-exposure prophylactics) and treatments for people living with HIV.
- **Family dynamics are diverse.** Organizations need to dismantle the current heteronormative understanding of what a “family” looks like. Access to many employer benefits for family members can be predicated on whether those relationships have legal recognition in a particular jurisdiction. These familial relationships can range from parent-child to spouses or partnerships. Organizations should do their utmost to ensure that their benefits package is sufficiently flexible to include LGBTQIA+ employees’ family members.
- **The physical office and work environment must be set up for people of all genders.** Gender-neutral bathrooms should be made easily available and clearly marked. Organizations must make clear that employees are free to enter whichever bathroom they are most comfortable using, while also providing private restrooms that are open to use by any gender.

Prioritize the needs of LGBTQIA+ people and issues in programming, especially including gender-related work.

Ensure programs of all kinds consider the unique implications for LGBTQIA+ people. Gender programs, for example, should not center only cis-gender women and girls or men and boys. Such programs should also take into account the needs of trans, gender non-conforming, and queer people of all identities.

Ensure that data collection, monitoring, and evaluation practices are as inclusive as possible without “othering” LGBTQIA+ staff

NGOs and donors must collect data in ways that allow for LGBTQIA+ individuals to be represented, while also allowing staff to make their own choices about what they disclose. Ultimately, the data collected should be as inclusive as possible without “othering” LGBTQIA+ staff. One way to do so is by including more options for staff who wish to share their gender identity or sexual orientation. If an individual’s

identity is not listed, using a blank text field with “I use another term” rather than “other” is more appropriate and inclusive. On the other hand, it is important to note that many questions asking about gender identity unintentionally erase the experience of trans people. One’s gender identity can be male, female, nonbinary, etc., and simultaneously be trans—though it should never be required for someone to disclose this or other aspects of their identity—because these identities are not mutually exclusive. In the same vein, a critical practice for trans inclusion is also to recognize and allow people to change their names (for example, email addresses, name-based user logins for internal systems, etc.) to align with their identity, even if that name does not match their legal name.

Donors can and should also be open to directing resources in creative ways and allowing for greater flexibility and anonymity in reporting. In the case of resource allocation, for example, a community organization might work with LGBTQIA+ people but for safety, might publicly say it does women’s rights work. Donors can support this work without “outing” this organization, but this will mean being intentional about safety in reporting and funding mechanisms.

Recommendations

1. **Commit to a “do no harm” approach:** Safety is a very real concern for many LGBTQIA+ people. Organizations should work with LGBTQIA+ organizations and activists to understand how their initiatives, projects, or general work environment might be inadvertently endangering LGBTQIA+ people by putting them in situations where they are targeted legally, structurally, and/or socially.
2. **Commit to a “nothing about us without us” approach:** Organizations should ensure that a diversity of LGBTQIA+ people are represented when working on any initiative (be it overseas programming or internal organizational policy) that impacts them and maintain an awareness of intersectional identities.
 - **Prioritize the needs of LGBTQIA+ people and issues in programming:** Implementing organizations must ensure programs of all kinds, but especially gender-specific work, consider the unique implications for LGBTQIA+ people.
 - **Set up internal systems to support LGBTQIA+ staff:** Organizations must look at the unique needs of LGBTQIA+ staff at the headquarters, program country, and local levels and remedy potential non-inclusive assumptions of gender and sexuality for staff and their families within human resources policies, benefits, data collection, physical office design, and other operations.
3. **Ensure that data collection, monitoring, and evaluation practices are inclusive:** NGOs and donors must collect data in ways that allow for LGBTQIA+ individuals to be represented, while also allowing individuals to make their own choices about what they disclose.