



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

WORK MATTERS

JULY 2024

COLUMN

The LGBTQ+ Employee Experience

June was officially PRIDE Month...LGBTQ+ PRIDE refers to the commemoration of the journey of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community, its impact on history, and the ongoing fight for equal rights stemming from the 1969 Stonewall Riots. PRIDE is both a celebration and a protest and in true LGBTQ+ style, one expected rainbow-themed parties, parades, educational workshops, art exhibitions, film screenings, panel discussions, and conferences, all strategically advocating for dignity, acceptance, marriage equality, universal rights and increased visibility for the community.

It is no secret that many people within our society hold negative emotions for the LGBTQ+ community. This directly translates into acts of physical and verbal abuse, overt and covert discrimination in the workplace, stereotyping, bullying, micro-aggressions, social exclusion, and homophobia. It is fair to say that the negative emotions and attitudes towards the community come from various sources, but this writer will explore the cultural and religious beliefs, awareness and education, and existing policies. In terms of cultural and religious beliefs, locally we are a diverse melting pot-supposedly, here every creed and race find an equal place. There is also a multiplicity of strong religious influences, some of which are negative to the LGBTQ+ community, and some which are more tolerant and supportive. In fact, research supports the view that in the 'Buck Breaking Ideology' homophobia is a painful remnant of the plantation - one in which slave masters publicly raped young boys and men in front of their families as a means of instilling fear and maintaining control over the enslaved population.

Further, the lack of awareness and education

in our society in relation to these issues are startling, and we are often reminded that the subject of 'gayness' or 'queerness' or 'confusion' is still very much taboo in some spaces and accompanied by deeply rooted biases.

Some heterosexual persons are simply unable and unwilling to address or analyze anything remotely affiliated with the LGBTQ+ reality. A lack of education and awareness perpetuates stereotypes and misinformation, and this results in people holding on to inaccurate definitions as well as archaic perceptions of sexuality, sexual conduct, sexual identity, and sexual orientation.

Workplace relationships are usually a good reflection of wider society, and as a result, all the biases and prejudices of society are usually present in the workplace. LGBTQ+ employees are rarely permitted to express their authenticity at work and those who have ventured 'out of the closet' have either been advised or forced to 'stop being so real.' Thus, LGBTQ+ employees suppress their own gender identities and adopt a single version of their personality whilst expressing 'straight-passing' mannerisms, all to adhere to heteronormative standards and expectations. Jimmy, a homosexual man, said "This keeps us safe. It's not that we are afraid or cowardly to be ourselves. It's just better to be safe." As such we have to be aware that in our discriminatory attitudes and actions, we are overtly forcing our brothers and sisters to make uncomfortable choices to self-identity in order to safeguard their personal safety.

In a 2022 Harvard Business Review article, writer Bernie Wong opined that "The LGBTQ+ community is endlessly diverse and intersectional, but many members share a unifying

experience of being ‘othered’, particularly in workplace settings. Many feel compelled to monitor their presentation of gender and sexuality constantly at work...many must respond to intrusive questioning, unsolicited commentary, and other microaggressions.” This writer felt it befitting to explore some of Wong’s points in greater detail. In terms of discrimination and harassment, in a 2021 NBC News article, it was stated that ‘Nearly 1 in 10 LGBTQ people in the United States experienced workplace discrimination, and almost half faced employment bias at some point in their careers.’ Harassment is usually manifested in derogatory comments, bullying from coworkers or superiors, and unequal treatment in terms of promotions and opportunities. Further, the lack of supportive policies that explicitly protect LGBT employees from discrimination and harassment is a critical issue. LGBTQ+ employees might not have access to the same benefits as their heterosexual colleagues, such as healthcare coverage for same-sex partners, among other such benefits; and this lack of employee support and resources usually leads to feelings of isolation. The stress and anxiety of this reality can also lead to mental health issues including depression and burnout. Several LGBTQ+ employees have mentioned the trauma that followed them from childhood directly to the workplace, and this speaks to the long-lasting and damaging effects of homophobia, which need to be addressed both in the workplace as well as the wider society.

Some organizations in T&T that promote diversity and inclusion may go beyond basic non-discrimination policies and actively create inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ employees.

However, no amount of policy interventions would be effective if employees and employers do not accept the choices of others and understand that the vulnerable must be protected and considered. As acts of humanity and dignity, we as people from a post-colonial society who have been enslaved and discriminated against, need to ensure that our views and decisions are coloured with humanity, tolerance, and

non-discrimination.

Mckacy-Prince Martin

Assistant Lecturer, CCLCS