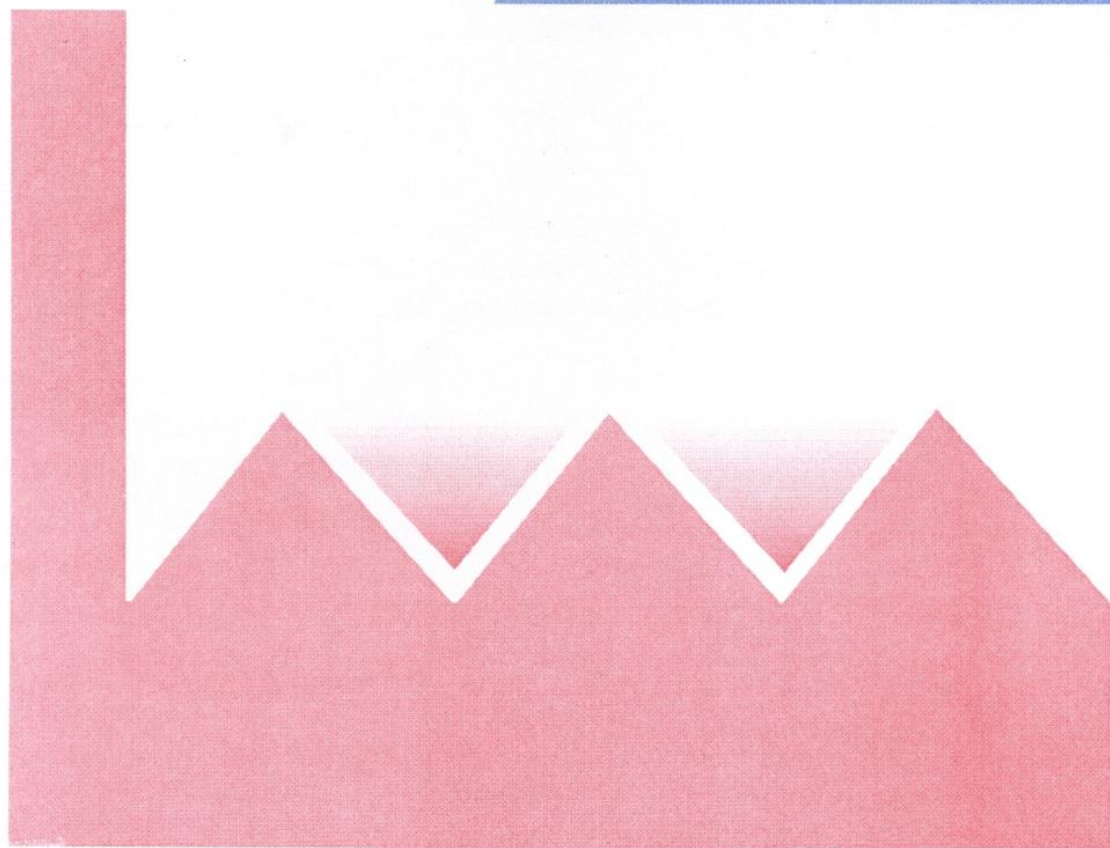


1998 Trade unions, homosexuality and work conference

- ▼ Exchange of experiences and Ideas
- ▼ Workshops
- ▼ Networking
- ▼ Meeting people with the same interests
- ▼ Discussions
- ▼ International cooperation
- ▼ Solidarity
- ▼ Brainstorm about common actions
- ▼ Information on setting up new groups
- ▼ Discussions with trade union officials



Amsterdam, 29 - 31 July 1998

Discrimination at the workplace is sometimes considered a private problem

“How are you? How did you spend your days off?”

Well-meaning words of welcome from a colleague can sometimes become an embarrassment. Most colleagues expect to hear about a visit to your family, about your husband or wife or children. They don't expect you to talk about your same-sex partner, even if he/she is the most important person in your life.

So what do you do? As a lesbian or gay worker you might be inclined to keep your stories to yourself. Being blunt and open may be too confrontational.

Even if you're not risking your life, colleagues may cause problems if they know you are lesbian or gay.

And what about the consequences if your boss finds out?

But if you avoid the subject, or just tell them about "a friend", that means denying the importance of the relationship. It means deliberately twisting the truth. That doesn't feel right.

This is a difficult dilemma, which many people face in the Western world.

In non-Western countries, having a relationship with someone of the same gender may cause even greater difficulties.

Being open about a same-sex relationship may lead to dismissal, social exclusion, police investigations, deportation, and in extreme cases even death threats.

There is not a single country on this planet in which lesbians and gays, both individually and in relationships, have just the same rights as heterosexuals.

Yet people keep saying that if you are not open, or if you have been open and are facing the consequences, it is your own personal choice, an individual problem.

That is how discrimination works.

Several types of discrimination

Discrimination can take various forms.

The most obvious and striking way in which discrimination occurs is when someone applying for a job does not get that job because of his or her homosexuality. Or when a worker entitled to a promotion never gets it. This is obvious, almost tangible discrimination: a personal slight.

Some countries have legal provisions forbidding this type of discrimination.

But legal prohibition of this type of discrimination does not mean that it goes away.

It is not difficult to imagine that an employer who wants to dismiss a worker can try to cover up and disguise the real motive. A law can forbid open expression of discriminatory ideas; it cannot stop people from having these ideas. That's the only reasonable way a law can work.

A second type of discrimination is aimed less at one person. You might call this type of discrimination systematic failure to recognize relationships.

It consists in differences in labour conditions. This does not mean that employers have created special working conditions for gays and lesbians.

However, some workplace conditions imply straight relationships, family arrangements, and other things that do not necessarily fit with gay or lesbian lifestyles.

There is not a single country today – as of July 1997 – in which someone can marry a person of the same gender. Some countries have provisions for partnership registration. Generally people in these relationships have more or less the same rights and duties as married couples – except for some rights concerning children.

In some countries unmarried people can secure some rights for their partners on the basis of their work situation.

For instance, they can arrange partnership pensions for their spouses. But many pension funds do not provide partnership pensions for unmarried couples. Moreover, some employers do not allow you a paid day off if someone who is very dear to you has died – unless that someone is your legal spouse or a "blood relative".

The third type of discrimination at the workplace occurs in an area that is not a traditional area of work for labour unions: the atmosphere at the workplace.

As has been said earlier, many straight people consider homosexuality something private. Saying something at work about your husband or wife is considered normal, while saying something about a same-sex lover can be considered shocking or confrontational. In many situations, coming out at work is very difficult. This means that many lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers do not feel at ease in their workplaces. They can be easy victims for jokes or even harassment.

Sometimes a group of workers creates an atmosphere in which it is necessary to have a victim. Anything that might be considered deviant or out of the ordinary can then be used as an excuse for victimizing. And once such a process has begun, it is very difficult to stop.

By contrast, if a workplace guarantees an open and friendly approach, if the working climate is better, productivity would probably even be higher.

The climate at work is a very delicate area. On the one hand, people should respect each other, and straight colleagues should be expected to respect a gay or lesbian colleague. On the other hand, the atmosphere at work will not be healthy if straight people cannot express their feelings, even if these include prejudices.

There is no general rule on this topic. If gays or lesbians feel vulnerable, even a misinterpretation of something that a colleague says can devastate them. If they feel comfortable at work, they may laugh about jokes played on them.

Gay and lesbian union policy is not just a policy for gay and lesbian workers. It is a policy to create working conditions and an atmosphere at work in which it does not matter if a worker has a straight or a lesbian or gay life, and in which she or he is free to combine various sexual lifestyles.

Different types of organisations, with different types of expertise, can help

In recent decades, workers have grown tired of accepting discrimination based on sexual orientation. They have realized that, although this discrimination is felt as something personal, there is a mechanism behind it that cannot be fought individually.

They have raised their voices.

Some of them have become active in the lesbian and gay (and bisexual, and transsexual, and transvestite) movement. The work that has been done by various groups and organizations has led to a growing expertise in defending victims of discrimination as well as in fighting unfair legislation and rules. International cooperation (as in the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA)) has accelerated the development of this expertise.

But some people have also turned to a more traditional movement with a lot of expertise in defending workers rights: trade unions and labour organizations. Since trade unions are supposed to defend the rights of all workers, they should also defend these rights against discrimination based on sexual orientation. And they have certainly gained a lot of experience and accumulated expertise in dealing with unfair rules and legislation.



- Onmiddellijke reïntegratie van Eliane Morissens
- Sluitende standpuntinname van het P.S. Bureau, die de sankties, genomen door de Socialistische Bestendige Deputatie van Henegouwen, opheft en de socialistische ideologie in de zaak Eliane Morissens, in de praktijk omzet
- Geen beroepsverbod
- Vrije meningsuiting, ook in het onderwijs
- Recht op arbeid, ook voor lesbiennes en homo's

**MASSALE BETOGING : ZATERDAG 27 MAART 82 OM 15 U
FLAGEYPLEIN, 1050 BRUSSEL**

**Trade unions
can play a role
in fighting
discrimination**

An increasing number of trade unions now recognizes gay and lesbian trade union policy as a working area of the union. Since the sixties, lesbian/gay as well as sometimes bisexual, transgender groups have emerged in some trade unions in mainly Western countries.

Some lesbian/gay groups outside the trade unions and the labour movement have been active in changing working conditions.

There is a growing awareness that trade unions and other forms of workers' groups – professional organizations – have a role in combatting discrimination on the basis of homosexuality:

- ☆ First, because trade unions have a role in fighting any form of discrimination and advocating human rights for everyone.
- ☆ Second, even for those trade unions and professional organizations that restrict their area of activity to working conditions, this is an inequality in working conditions.
- ☆ Finally, because lesbians and gay men are union members too, labour unions need to defend their rights.

Of course, not every union now automatically defends lesbian and gay (and bisexual, and transsexual) rights.

Unions reflect what their members think. And sometimes union members need to have extra information and to have their consciousness raised before they will support the struggle for equal rights.

There is some experience in Europe, Northern America, and Australia in changing the climate in labour unions.

Some of this experience can be useful in other countries, too. But of course there are also big differences among countries. There are countries in which the labour movement is forbidden. Countries in which unions are completely controlled by the government.

Obviously a different approach will be necessary in these countries.

Recognizing the differences, exchanging experiences, and showing solidarity can be important.

**The 1998
International
Conference is a
chance to
exchange
experiences,
share expertise,
and
consolidate a
network**

In 1998, an international conference on Trade Unions, Homosexuality and Work will take place in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

The conference is mainly meant for people with an active interest in the issue.

But the organizers also hope to welcome official trade union representatives. In this way, the discussions can be very practical instead of theoretical; and this will also guarantee that the conference can have a direct impact.

During the conference, experts from universities and other organizations working in this area will provide extra information.

The initiative for this conference was taken at the 1994 World Conference of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) in New York. Since then, the ILGA has firmly supported the initiative for the conference.

Since the actual conference organization has had to be based in trade union organizations, and because of the idea of linking the conference to the 1998 Gay Games (in Amsterdam), it was clear that Dutch trade unions would have to play an important role. And they picked up this role with enthusiasm. A steering committee for the conference is now functioning with active members from the Dutch trade unions AOb, Abva-Kabo, Onderwijsbonden CNV, and AFMP, the British UNISON, the German ÖTV, the US AFT AFL-CIO, the Belgian ABVV-BBTK and the Italian CGIL.

The largest Dutch trade union federations, FNV and CNV, UNISON and ÖTV have declared their support for the initiative and are willing to lend their names to the conference.

The conference will last three days: 29, 30 and 31 July 1998. It will be held in Amsterdam. Further details will be available from the

Steering Committee of the
Trade Unions Homosexuality and Work Conference,
PO Box 732,
NL 2700 AL ZOETERMEER, Netherlands

The most up-to-date information can be found on our homepage, which is located at

<http://utopia.knoware.nl/users/modijk>

**Photo exhibition
about
lesbians and gays
at work**

Can lesbians and gays give a *special flavour* to their jobs or work places? Do they select specific types of jobs? How do they feel about their work, anyway? While at work, can they be recognized as gays and lesbians?

The Amsterdam art gallery *De Opsteker* is planning a photo exhibition about *Gays and Lesbians at Work* to take place during the international conference and during and after the Gay Games, i.e. from 19 July up to 9 August.

Professional and semi professional photographers are invited to send in photos for participation in this exhibition under the banner:

to be or not to be lesbian or gay at the work place
and to show by prints that it is (or is not) worth while to position as gay or lesbian in the working force.

You could also ask a (semi) professional photographer to make a picture of you at your workplace.

Prints in colour or black and white (no slides!) have to be sent in before 1 January 1998 to the gallery.

A panel will select some 20 prints for the exhibition and for a special publication by the Gallery on the occasion of the Gay Games and the international conference. The selected prints will be framed by the gallery (40 by 50 centimeters). Print may be of different size, preferably 24 by 36 centimeters, maximum 40 by 50 centimeters.

Photographers will have their prints returned, provided a return envelope and sufficient means for return postage are included in the mailing.



MAILING ADDRESS:

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