

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIONS TO INCLUDE LGBTI+ DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

LGBTI+

BACKGROUND

Thirty years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO) removed homosexuality as a mental disorder from the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems. Since then, the LGBTI+ community has worked to eradicate harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender expression through laws and policies, as well as through activities that celebrate diversity. However, despite the many achievements, homophobia still exists. LGBTI+ workers still suffer labour disparities and discrimination because of their sexual orientation or identity. These range from income disparity to workplace harassment, from unfair treatment at work to discrimination when applying for a job.

In times of crisis, such as the one we are currently experiencing, this situation worsens. The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional issues for LGBTI+ workers such as:

- **Access to Health Services:** LGBTI+ people regularly experience stigma and discrimination while seeking health services, leading to disparities in access, quality and availability of healthcare. In countries where laws criminalize same sex relations or target trans persons due to their gender identity or expression, the negative health outcomes are exacerbated as LGBTI+ workers may not access healthcare services for fear of arrest or violence.
- **De-prioritization of required health services:** Given overloaded health systems, treatment of LGBTI+ people may be interrupted or deprioritized, including HIV treatment and testing, hormonal treatment and gender affirming treatments for trans people.
- **Stigmatization, discrimination, cyberbullying, hate speech and attacks on the LGBTI+ community:** LGBTI+ people have previously been blamed for disasters, both manmade and natural, and the UN reports that this is happening in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with an increase in homophobic and transphobic rhetoric.
- **Domestic violence and abuse:** Due to stay-at-home restrictions, many LGBTI+ youth are confined in hostile environments with unsupportive family members or co-habitants. This can increase their exposure to violence, as well as their anxiety and depression.

In terms of livelihood, LGBTI+ workers are also disproportionately represented in sectors that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic (ex: tourism, retail, creative industries/media and entertainment), or in the informal sector, with lack of access to paid sick leave, unemployment compensation and coverage. This situation increases their risk of poor mental and personal health.

To ensure that LGBTI+ workers and their particular concerns are adequately considered, UNI recommends that unions take into consideration the following recommendations:

Prevention

- Engage and represent LGBTI+ workers' concerns in discussions, meetings and decision-making to address the crisis and its aftermath
- Communicate frequently and clearly and provide proper information on the measures that are being taken
- Have a contact point for LGBTI+ workers so they can have someone to ask questions or raise concerns to
- Provide support for LGBTI+ workers to protect their mental health and provide them with psychological and moral support (hotlines, group calls/chats, etc.), ensuring them that their needs are being listened to and looked after

Protection

- To address the potential negative social impacts of physical distancing, efforts must be made to ensure that LGBTI+ workers, particularly youth, know that they are not alone and feel encouraged to seek support and social connections through means that do not rely on physical proximity
- Provide institutional information and psychological support for LGBTI+ workers who might be experiencing domestic violence

Action

For unions:

- Speak out against stigmatization and hate speech directed at the LGBTI+ workers in the context of the pandemic
- Analyze measures to address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and the particular vulnerabilities of LGBTI+ workers, and ensure that in all policies LGBTI+ people are fully covered
- Engage and represent LGBTI+ workers' concerns in discussions, meetings and decision-making to address the crisis and its aftermath

With employers:

- Negotiate strong collective agreements that ensure that all workers have access to social security benefits, including unemployment insurance
- Guarantee the payment of the wages of workers in sectors that have been the most affected by the pandemic, as many of them do not have any access to social security
- Inclusion of agreements with expanded access to paid sick leave for workers who are unwell or require special medical treatment