

Bisexuality: a trade union issue

UNISON is the UK's largest trade union, with more than 1.3 million members. We represent all staff who provide public services in the public, private and voluntary sectors. UNISON has a long and proud history on equality.

We recognise that bisexual people face particular issues at work and we strive to tackle biphobic prejudice and discrimination.

Bisexual people are those who feel attraction to more than one gender. The 2010 Equality Act protects bisexual people (and lesbian, gay and heterosexual people) from discrimination because of their sexual orientation.

Biphobia – the facts

Biphobia is prejudice and discrimination against bisexual people. Research published in 2014 confirmed that bisexual workers experience even higher levels of discrimination than gay workers. Bisexual people are much more likely to feel they have to hide their sexual orientation at work than lesbians and gay men (very few heterosexual people hide their sexual orientation). Amongst bisexual workers, women faced greater prejudice than men. The research is *The ups and downs of LGBs' workplace experiences*, published by Manchester Business School.

These findings back up *The Bisexuality Report 2012* by the Open University which showed that of all the larger sexual orientation groups, bisexual people have the worst mental health, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide. This is directly linked to the high levels of biphobic prejudice and discrimination.

Biphobia feeds off myths and stereotypes which range from bisexual people being untrustworthy, greedy and promiscuous to bisexuality being 'just a phase' or not really existing at all. Bisexual people have to repeatedly 'come out' to avoid people making wrong assumptions about their sexual orientation.

Tackling biphobia in the workplace

Trade unions exist to defend their members from discrimination and to work for better employment conditions. So tackling biphobia in the workplace is clearly a trade union issue.

Bisexual workers can feel particularly isolated, experiencing stigma from both straight colleagues *and* lesbian and gay colleagues.

Although many workplace equality policies refer to lesbian, gay and bisexual people, few do more than pay lip service to the existence and rights of bisexual workers.

Recommendations for workplaces

The Open University report on bisexuality recommends that managers and workers:

- Inform yourself and avoid stereotypes
- Separate biphobia from homophobia, recognising that there are specific issues facing bisexual people
- Note that these include invisibility; stereotypes about greediness or promiscuity and pressure to be either gay or straight
- Make sure bisexuality is specifically included in equality policies
- Don't assume all bisexual people are the same: bisexual people come from all sections of society
- Recognise the role that biphobia plays in negative outcomes for bisexual people.

UNISON endorses these recommendations and urges employers to adopt them. They are simple actions but they can transform the day to day experience of bisexual workers.

UNISON – always by your side

We are determined to make sure bisexual issues are fully addressed in our work. We hold annual meetings for bisexual members to network, identify issues and discuss proposals for national LGBT+ conference. There are reserved seats for bisexual members on the national LGBT+ committee. Bisexual members also meet at our national LGBT+ conference.

If you are facing biphobic discrimination at work, contact your local rep for support and advice. There is also information on UNISON's website.

How you can get involved

Each of UNISON's 12 regions has an LGBT+ group with a confidential mailing list.

Many branches have their own LGBT+ officer. Contact details should be widely publicised, so you can find out without outing yourself. Alternatively, ask your regional LGBT+ group. All branches should have an equality co-ordinator and many have workplace equality reps.

To find out more

- Visit our webpages www.unison.org.uk/out
- Ring UNISONdirect 0800 0857 857
- Write to Susan Mawhood, national officer - LGBT+ Equality, UNISON Centre, 130 Euston Road, London NW1 2AY
- or email out@unison.co.uk

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