

Committee: International Labor Organization

Issue: Ensuring Safe and Inclusive Work Environments for Women and LGBTQ+ Individuals

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Introduction

In the contemporary global economy, creating safe and inclusive work environments for all individuals remains a fundamental challenge that requires urgent attention from the international community. Women and LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face significant barriers to equal participation in the workforce, including discrimination, harassment, violence, and systemic exclusion from various sectors and leadership positions. These challenges not only violate fundamental human rights but also undermine economic growth, productivity, and social cohesion.

The International Labor Organization values workplace equality and safety as essential components of social justice. Despite decades of progress in establishing international labor standards, significant gaps persist in protecting workers from discrimination and ensuring their full participation in economic life.

Recent studies indicate that women continue to earn less than men for equivalent work, with the global gender pay gap estimated at approximately 20 percent. LGBTQ+ individuals face even greater challenges. Surveys show that up to 46 percent have experienced workplace discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. These statistics highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address both apparent discrimination and subtle forms of exclusion that perpetuate inequality.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, with women and LGBTQ+ individuals disproportionately affected by job losses, reduced working hours, and increased caregiving responsibilities. This crisis has underscored the importance of building resilient, inclusive work environments that can adapt to changing circumstances while protecting the rights and dignity of all workers.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legal frameworks, policy interventions, and cultural change initiatives. It requires collaboration between governments, employers, workers' organizations, and civil society to create sustainable solutions that promote equality, safety, and inclusion in all aspects of working life.

Definition of Key Terms

LGBTQ+

An acronym standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, the plus sign represents additional sexual orientations and gender identities within the community. Lesbian refers to women attracted to women, gay typically describes men attracted to men, bisexual indicates attraction to both one's own and other genders, transgender describes individuals whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth, queer serves as an umbrella term, and questioning refers to those exploring their identity. The plus sign encompasses additional identities such as pansexual, asexual, non-binary, genderfluid, and intersex individuals, reflecting the diverse spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities.

Workplace Discrimination

Any distinction, exclusion, or preference made based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, social origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity that has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation.

Gender Identity

A person's internal sense of being male, female, or something else, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth.

Sexual Orientation

A person's physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual orientations.

Workplace Harassment

Any unwelcome conduct that is based on protected characteristics and has the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.

Inclusive Work Environment

A workplace culture that values diversity, promotes equal opportunities, and ensures that all employees feel respected, valued, and able to contribute their full potential regardless of their background or identity.

Decent Work

Work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace, social protection for families, better prospects for personal development, and freedom for people to express their concerns, organize, and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Intersectionality

The interconnected nature of social categorizations, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics, creates overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Reasonable Accommodation

Modifications or adjustments to a job, the work environment, or the way work is usually done that enable a qualified individual to enjoy equal employment opportunities.

Glass Ceiling

An invisible upper limit in corporations and other organizations, above which it is difficult or impossible for women and minorities to rise in the hierarchy.

Affirmative Action

Policies and practices designed to increase opportunities for underrepresented groups in employment, education, and other areas where they have been historically excluded.

History

Early struggles and systemic exclusion

Historically, women and LGBTQ+ individuals faced systematic exclusion from the workforce or were relegated to specific roles deemed "appropriate" by society. Women were largely confined to domestic work or low-paying jobs in textiles and agriculture, while same-sex relationships were criminalized in most countries, forcing LGBTQ+ individuals to hide their identities to maintain employment. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century brought women into factories in large numbers, but under exploitative conditions, with significantly lower wages than men.

The early 20th century saw the first organized efforts to challenge these inequalities. The 1888 London matchgirls' strike, led by Annie Besant, demonstrated women's capacity for collective action

when 1,400 female workers walked out to protest dangerous working conditions and unfair fines. Similarly, the 1909 Uprising of the 20,000 in New York saw primarily female garment workers, many of them immigrants, strike for better wages and working conditions despite facing police brutality and arrest.

Breaking barriers through activism

The post-World War II era brought new momentum to labor rights movements. Women like Dolores Huerta co-founded the United Farm Workers union in the 1960s, fighting for the rights of agricultural workers while challenging both gender and racial discrimination. Her famous slogan "Sí, se puede" (Yes, we can) became a rallying cry for marginalized workers everywhere.

The 1960s and 70s also marked the beginning of organized LGBTQ+ labor activism. Harvey Milk, before becoming a prominent political figure, organized boycotts of businesses that discriminated against gay employees. The Stonewall riots of 1969, while primarily about police harassment, had significant workplace implications as many participants risked losing their jobs if their sexual orientation became known to employers.

Modern movements and ongoing struggles

The 1970s feminist movement brought workplace discrimination into sharp focus. The 9to5 movement, founded by Karen Nussbaum, organized office workers to fight for equal pay and advancement opportunities, inspiring the 1980 film of the same name. Meanwhile, figures like Sylvia Rivera fought not just for LGBTQ+ recognition but specifically for the rights of transgender individuals to work without fear of discrimination or violence.

More recent decades have seen both progress and setbacks. The 2018 teachers' strikes across multiple U.S. states were led predominantly by women fighting for better wages in a feminized profession. At the same time, transgender individuals continue to face employment discrimination, with studies showing unemployment rates significantly higher than the general population, leading to grassroots organizing efforts and the emergence of organizations specifically focused on transgender workplace rights.

Key Issues

Persistent Gender-Based Discrimination

Despite decades of legal progress toward gender equality, the workplace remains an uneven playing field for women. The numbers tell a stark story. [According to the International Labor](#)

Organization, women globally earn about 20 percent less than men for equivalent work. In the United States specifically, women earned 83.6% of what men earned in 2024, representing only marginal improvement from previous years.

This wage gap isn't just about individual paychecks. It's about entire career trajectories being derailed. Women of color face even steeper uphill battles, while women with disabilities encounter compounded barriers that traditional equality measures often overlook. The segregation of women into lower-paid sectors remains entrenched, creating what economists call "occupational crowding" that artificially depresses wages in female-dominated fields.

While women now make up 48 percent of entry-level positions, their representation drops dramatically as you climb the corporate ladder. For every 100 men promoted to management roles in 2024, only 81 women received similar promotions—a figure that has barely budged since 2018.

Unchanged Violence and Harassment

37% of women still reported experiencing harassment at work in 2024, a number that hasn't moved despite years of #MeToo awareness and corporate policy overhauls. Sexual harassment remains as pervasive as it was five years ago, according to McKinsey's comprehensive 2024 Women in the Workplace study.

LGBTQ+ workers face additional layers of harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity, often experiencing what researchers call "minority stress"—the chronic psychological pressure of navigating hostile work environments. Transgender individuals report particularly severe discrimination, from being denied bathroom access to facing job loss simply for being authentic about their identity.

The #MeToo movement created important conversations, but it also revealed how deeply embedded these problems are in workplace culture. Many organizations discovered that having policies on paper meant little when reporting mechanisms were broken, when managers weren't trained to respond appropriately, or when company culture still tolerated "boys will be boys" behavior.

LGBTQ+ Workplace Discrimination

Up to 46 percent of LGBTQ+ workers have experienced workplace discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, yet this remains one of the most underreported forms of workplace bias. Many LGBTQ+ employees develop what psychologists call "identity management strategies"—carefully controlling how much of their authentic selves they reveal at work.

The lack of consistent legal protections compounds these challenges. While some progressive jurisdictions have comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, vast swaths of the working world lack basic protections for sexual orientation and gender identity. This patchwork of legal coverage means that an LGBTQ+ worker's rights can literally change when they cross state lines or accept a remote position with a company based elsewhere.

The Intersection Where Multiple Discriminations Collide

LGBTQ+ women, women of color, and women with disabilities don't experience discrimination as separate, additive challenges—they face intersectional discrimination that's often more severe than the sum of its parts. A Black lesbian woman, for instance, might face racism from some colleagues, homophobia from others, and sexism from yet others, creating a workplace environment where she's constantly navigating multiple forms of bias simultaneously.

This intersectionality requires more nuanced approaches than traditional diversity training. It means recognizing that someone can be privileged in one dimension (perhaps being white) while facing discrimination in others (being transgender), and that these identities interact in complex ways that affect their workplace experience.

The Mental Health Crisis in Disguise

The psychological toll of workplace discrimination extends far beyond hurt feelings. Workers who experience discrimination report significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. Poor working environments, including discrimination and inequality, pose direct risks to mental health, according to health researchers.

This creates a vicious cycle: discrimination affects mental health, which can then impact job performance, which can then be used to justify further discriminatory treatment. Some workers develop what clinicians call "anticipatory anxiety"—constantly bracing for the next discriminatory incident, which itself becomes exhausting and affects their ability to focus on actual work.

The pandemic amplified these mental health challenges, particularly for women who were disproportionately expected to manage remote schooling and increased caregiving responsibilities while maintaining their professional duties.

Economic Impact

The economic consequences of workplace discrimination ripple far beyond individual workers' bank accounts. When talent is wasted through discriminatory practices, entire economies suffer. Companies miss out on diverse perspectives that drive innovation, while discriminated workers contribute less to economic growth due to underemployment and lost productivity.

The OECD estimates that closing gender gaps in labor force participation could lead to substantial economic gains, potentially increasing GDP per capita by 20 percent in some countries. For individual companies, the business case is equally compelling. Organizations with diverse leadership teams consistently outperform their homogeneous counterparts on financial metrics.

Yet many organizations continue to leave money on the table through discriminatory hiring, promotion, and retention practices that prevent them from accessing the full talent pool.

Educational Paradox

Women now earn more college degrees than men in most developed countries, yet the pay gap persists and leadership representation remains stubbornly low. This educational paradox reveals that discrimination isn't about qualifications—it's about structural barriers that prevent qualified women from advancing.

The problem often starts with access to certain fields. Women remain underrepresented in STEM education and careers, not because they lack ability but because they face cultural discouragement, biased teaching practices, and male-dominated environments that can feel unwelcoming. Even when women do enter technical fields, they're more likely to leave due to workplace culture issues.

Professional development opportunities also show gender disparities. Women receive less mentorship, are excluded from informal networks where deals get made and careers advance, and often find themselves steered toward "supportive" roles rather than leadership tracks.

The Informal Economy's Hidden Discrimination

Millions of workers—disproportionately women and minorities—work in the informal economy without basic legal protections. Domestic workers, gig economy participants, and agricultural workers often face discrimination with no recourse to formal complaint mechanisms or legal remedies.

This informal discrimination can be particularly severe because it operates outside regulatory oversight. A domestic worker might face sexual harassment with no HR department to report to. A gig

worker might be denied opportunities based on their name or photo with no anti-discrimination law to protect them.

The "Second Shift" That Never Ends

Despite decades of women entering the workforce, the distribution of household labor remains dramatically unequal. Women still perform approximately twice as much unpaid domestic work as men, creating what sociologists call the "second shift"—coming home from work to another full day of cooking, cleaning, and childcare.

This second shift becomes a professional liability. Women are more likely to turn down promotions that require travel, less likely to stay late for networking events, and more prone to career interruptions due to family responsibilities. During the pandemic, these challenges intensified as women disproportionately left the workforce to manage remote schooling and increased caregiving demands.

The assumption that women will prioritize family over career affects even women without children. Young women report being passed over for opportunities because managers assume they'll eventually leave to have kids, while mothers face what researchers call the "maternal wall"—subtle but persistent bias that assumes their commitment to work has diminished.

Inadequate Legal Frameworks

Having anti-discrimination laws on the books doesn't automatically translate to discrimination-free workplaces. Enforcement mechanisms are often inadequate, complaint processes can be intimidating or ineffective, and legal remedies may be insufficient to make victims whole.

Many workers who experience discrimination never report it, either because they fear retaliation, don't know their rights, or believe nothing will change. When they do report, investigations can be lengthy, traumatic, and may not result in meaningful consequences for perpetrators.

The rise of forced arbitration clauses has further limited workers' options, requiring them to resolve discrimination claims through private arbitration rather than public courts, often with outcomes that favor employers.

Technology's involvement

Artificial intelligence and automated hiring systems promised to reduce human bias in employment decisions, but they've often perpetuated existing discrimination in new forms. AI systems

trained on historical data can embed past discriminatory patterns into algorithmic decision-making, while appearing objective and neutral.

Meanwhile, remote work technology has created new opportunities for inclusion—allowing workers with disabilities better access to employment and enabling more flexible work arrangements that can help working parents. However, remote work has also created new forms of exclusion, with some workers missing out on informal mentoring and networking opportunities that happen in physical offices.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

Department of Labor (DOL)

The U.S. Department of Labor enforces federal workplace anti-discrimination laws and promotes equal employment opportunities. The DOL has implemented initiatives to address gender-based discrimination and promote workplace equality, including the Equal Pay and Safe Workplaces Executive Order. The agency works to ensure compliance with federal laws prohibiting discrimination based on sex and other protected characteristics.

Microsoft

Microsoft has emerged as a leader in workplace diversity and inclusion, implementing comprehensive policies to support women and LGBTQ+ employees. The company has achieved gender pay equity and established employee resource groups to support underrepresented workers. Microsoft's initiatives include unconscious bias training, inclusive hiring practices, and support for transgender employees, demonstrating how private sector leadership can drive positive change.

Germany

Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs

Germany's Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has implemented progressive policies to promote workplace equality, including parental leave reforms and anti-discrimination legislation. The ministry has worked to address gender-based discrimination and promote women's participation in the workforce, while also supporting LGBTQ+ rights through comprehensive anti-discrimination frameworks.

SAP

SAP, the German multinational software corporation, has established itself as a leader in diversity and inclusion. The company has implemented gender-neutral parental leave policies, established LGBTQ+ employee networks, and committed to achieving gender parity in leadership positions. SAP's approach demonstrates how technology companies can create inclusive workplace cultures that support all employees.

United Kingdom

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

The UK's Department for Work and Pensions has implemented various initiatives to promote workplace equality, including the Gender Pay Gap Reporting requirements and support for flexible working arrangements. The department has also worked to address discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals through policy development and enforcement mechanisms.

Unilever

Unilever has implemented comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategies across its global operations, including initiatives to promote gender equality and LGBTQ+ inclusion. The company has established employee resource groups, implemented inclusive recruitment practices, and committed to achieving gender balance in leadership positions by 2025.

Canada

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)

Canada's Employment and Social Development Canada has implemented progressive policies to promote workplace equality, including the Federal Contractors Program and the Pay Equity Act. The department has also worked to address discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals through comprehensive human rights legislation and enforcement mechanisms.

Shopify

Shopify has implemented inclusive workplace policies that support women and LGBTQ+ employees, including comprehensive health benefits, parental leave policies, and employee resource groups. The company has demonstrated leadership in creating an inclusive workplace culture in the technology sector.

Australia

Fair Work Commission

Australia's Fair Work Commission oversees workplace relations and anti-discrimination enforcement. The commission has addressed gender-based discrimination through various mechanisms, including equal pay cases and investigations into workplace harassment. Recent developments include increased focus on family and domestic violence leave and flexible working arrangements.

Atlassian

Atlassian has implemented comprehensive diversity and inclusion programs, including initiatives to address gender imbalances in technology and support for LGBTQ+ employees. The company has established employee resource groups and implemented inclusive hiring practices to foster a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

Brazil***Ministry of Labor and Employment***

Brazil's Ministry of Labor and Employment has implemented various initiatives to promote workplace equality, including anti-discrimination legislation and enforcement mechanisms. The ministry has worked to address gender-based discrimination and promote women's participation in the workforce, while also addressing challenges faced by LGBTQ+ workers.

Petrobras

Petrobras has implemented diversity and inclusion initiatives, including programs to promote gender equality and support for LGBTQ+ employees. The company has established employee resource groups and implemented anti-discrimination policies to create more inclusive workplace environments.

South Africa***Department of Labor***

South Africa's Department of Labor has implemented comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation through the Employment Equity Act and other frameworks. The department has

worked to address historical inequalities and promote workplace equality for women and LGBTQ+ individuals through various enforcement mechanisms and policy initiatives.

Vodacom

Vodacom has implemented diversity and inclusion strategies that support women and LGBTQ+ employees, including leadership development programs and employee resource groups. The company has demonstrated leadership in promoting workplace equality in the telecommunications sector.

Sweden

Ministry of Employment

Sweden's Ministry of Employment has implemented progressive policies to promote workplace equality, including reforms to parental leave and anti-discrimination legislation. The ministry has worked to address gender-based discrimination and promote women's participation in the workforce while also supporting LGBTQ+ rights through comprehensive frameworks.

Volvo Group

Volvo Group has implemented comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategies, including initiatives to promote gender equality and support for LGBTQ+ employees. The company has established employee resource groups and implemented inclusive hiring practices to foster a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of event
1919	International Labor Organization (ILO) established; committed to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labor rights
December 19, 1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights; established fundamental principles of equality and non-discrimination
June 29, 1951	ILO Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration; established the principle of equal pay for work of equal value

March 25, 1951	Treaty of Rome (Article 119); EU's foundational equal pay principle –basis for European gender equality law
June 25, 1958	ILO Convention No. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation); prohibited discrimination in employment based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin
July 2, 1964	US Civil Rights Act; landmark national legislation. Title VII prohibited employment discrimination in world's largest economy
December 18, 1979	UN Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); first binding European law implementing equal pay
1981	ILO Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities; addressed the needs of workers with family responsibilities
June 17, 1999	ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor; prohibited and eliminated the worst forms of child labor
June 29, 2000	EU Employment Equality Directive 2000/78/EC; protection against discrimination based on religion age disability, and sexual orientation
December 13, 2006	UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities; first treaty specifically addressing workplace discrimination against disabled workers
June 2019	ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment; first international treaty to address violence and harassment in the world of work
March 7, 2024	EU Pay Transparency Directive enters force; requirement for salary transparency

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The history of addressing workplace discrimination and promoting inclusive work environments has evolved significantly since the establishment of the ILO in 1919. Early efforts focused primarily on protecting women workers through conventions addressing night work and maternity protection, though these often reflected paternalistic attitudes rather than equality principles.

The adoption of ILO Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration in 1951 marked a significant milestone in establishing the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. This was followed by

Convention No. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) in 1958, which established a comprehensive framework for prohibiting discrimination in employment based on various grounds, including sex.

The 1970s and 1980s saw further development with the adoption of conventions addressing workers with family responsibilities and the gradual recognition of work-life balance issues. The ILO's approach evolved from protective measures to promoting equality and non-discrimination, reflecting changing social attitudes and increased advocacy from women's rights organizations.

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed increased attention to diversity and inclusion issues, with the emergence of corporate diversity programs and the gradual recognition of LGBTQ+ rights in the workplace. The development of international human rights frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), provided additional support for workplace equality initiatives.

The landmark adoption of ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment in 2019 represented a significant achievement in protecting all workers from workplace violence and harassment. This convention, ratified by multiple countries, provides a comprehensive framework for addressing these issues and explicitly recognizes the diverse forms of discrimination that workers may face.

Recent initiatives, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Women's Economic Empowerment agenda, have further emphasized the importance of workplace equality. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities and created new challenges, leading to increased focus on building resilient, inclusive work environments.

Despite these advances, significant challenges remain. Many countries lack comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, enforcement mechanisms are often inadequate, and cultural attitudes continue to perpetuate discrimination. The informal economy, where many women and marginalized individuals work, often lacks basic protections.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement

Establishing comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that explicitly includes sexual orientation and gender identity as protected characteristics is essential for creating safe and inclusive work environments. Countries should ratify and implement ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and

Harassment, while also strengthening domestic legal frameworks to address discrimination and harassment.

Governments should establish robust enforcement mechanisms, including specialized agencies with adequate resources and training to investigate discrimination complaints. This includes creating accessible reporting mechanisms, protecting whistleblowers from retaliation, and ensuring that remedies are meaningful and effective.

Promoting Corporate Responsibility and Best Practices

Encouraging private sector leadership through voluntary commitments and best practice sharing can drive positive change. Companies should be incentivized to adopt comprehensive diversity and inclusion policies, conduct regular pay equity audits, and implement inclusive hiring and promotion practices.

Governments can support these efforts through procurement policies that prioritize companies with strong diversity and inclusion records, tax incentives for employers that demonstrate measurable progress in workplace equality, and recognition programs that highlight exemplary practices.

Addressing Intersectional Discrimination

Developing targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by individuals who experience multiple forms of discrimination is crucial. This includes creating tailored support programs for LGBTQ+ women, women of color, and women with disabilities, while also addressing the specific needs of transgender workers.

Training programs should incorporate intersectionality perspectives, helping employers and workers understand how different forms of discrimination interact and compound each other. This approach requires collaboration with civil society organizations representing diverse communities.

Fostering International Cooperation

Strengthening international cooperation through multilateral frameworks, bilateral agreements, and technical assistance programs can help countries share best practices and coordinate responses to cross-border challenges. This includes supporting capacity building in developing countries and promoting regional cooperation initiatives.

The ILO should continue to play a leading role in developing international standards and providing technical assistance to member states. This includes supporting the development of national action plans,

providing training and resources, and facilitating dialogue between governments, employers, and workers' organizations.

Investing in Data Collection and Research

Improving data collection and research on workplace discrimination is essential for understanding the scope of the problem and developing effective solutions. This includes conducting regular surveys on workplace experiences, analyzing pay equity data, and studying the impact of policy interventions.

Governments and international organizations should invest in research that examines the intersection of different forms of discrimination and identifies effective strategies for promoting inclusion. This evidence base can inform policy development and help track progress over time.

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The most useful links (bolded) are the core ILO conventions, key statistical reports, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are essential for understanding international labor standards and workplace equality issues.