

## ***Human Rights and Equity: Frequently Asked Questions***

### **Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Workplace**

#### **Have lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender people achieved equality in the workplace?**

In the last two decades unions have played a key role in ensuring equal access to benefits, parental leave and other entitlements once available only to workers in heterosexual relationships. While significant legal gains have been made, we know this does not mean full dignity and equality in the workplace or society. The reality is that many lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people experience social exclusion, targeting for gossip, inappropriate questioning, unequal treatment, ridicule and harassment because of their sexual orientation.

#### **What are our responsibilities as union members?**

ONA believes in everyone's right to dignity and equal treatment on the job. We are committed to making our members' workplaces safe and respectful for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. We must educate ourselves to recognize and challenge homophobic comments and behaviour. We must support and defend our LGBT members who experience discrimination or harassment and enforce their rights using employers' workplace policies and the collective agreement.

#### **What is homophobia?**

Homophobia is the irrational fear of homosexuality and those who are attracted to members of the same sex. It ranges from dislike and avoidance, to acts of discrimination and harassment in the workplace, to hatred and acts of violence.

Homophobic comments refer to homosexuality or LGBT people in disparaging ways. They can often arise when a person does not conform to narrow gender roles, i.e. when a man acts "feminine," he may be called a "fag." When woman acts "masculine," she may be referred to as a "dyke." If someone is ridiculed because he or she is acting outside what is considered normal male or female behaviour, the homophobia is based on rigid gender roles. Therefore, to fight homophobia, we must also fight sexism.

"Gay-bashing" is an expression that refers to verbal and/or physical attacks on people thought to be LGBT. It can involve sexual slurs, expletives, intimidation, threats and physical violence.

#### **What is heterosexism?**

Heterosexism is a form of oppression based on the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and proper expression of sexuality. It is deeply rooted in the culture and institutions in our society. Most of us are taught at school, at home, through advertising or religion that the only normal sexual activity or relationships are heterosexual ones. These are powerful, pervasive messages. We are rarely taught that same sex relationships are positive and natural ways of loving and being in the world.

## **What is sexual orientation?**

Sexual orientation indicates who we are attracted to in our erotic lives. Studies commonly suggest that approximately 10 per cent of the population is gay or lesbian. It has been suggested that 15 per cent of the American population is bisexual. People hold different views about the origins of sexual orientation. Some believe it is established early in life. Others believe it is based on a preference or a conscious choice.

## **What is meant by transgender?**

A transgender person perceives themselves and identifies as belonging to a different sex and feels the need to live that way. Some “trans” people proceed with gender reassignment surgery and some do not. Many people wrongly assume that gender identity and sexual orientation are linked. Some trans people enter into same-sex relationships, while others seek opposite-sex relationships. Transgender people experience transphobia in part because they upset for others the deeply held norms of gender identity, biology and gender expression.

## **Why LGBT “pride?”**

Most people grow up being taught or told to be ashamed of at least some aspect of themselves and their lives. This is especially true for LGBT people, and all those who aren’t part of the dominant culture. Throwing off this shame and learning to be proud is at the heart of pride movements.

## **How do homophobia and heterosexism affect us in the workplace?**

Homophobic or heterosexist comments harm the dignity of LGBT workers by suggesting that they are lesser people. Homophobia keeps many LGBT workers invisible and “in the closet.” They choose not to disclose their sexual orientation for fear of losing the friendship and support of co-workers, being harassed and losing opportunities in the workplace.

Homophobic comments like “you’re not gay to me, you’re a person” or “that’s fine as long as you don’t flaunt it” treat LGBT people as less than whole people. “Flaunt” usually means when LGBT people do or say anything that makes people aware that they are LGBT. When LGBT people do speak about their relationships and families, they are acting courageously, refusing to be invisible and affirming themselves as whole people.

## **What can I do as an ally?**

- Change homophobic or heterosexist attitudes you may hold.
- Interrupt homophobic jokes and bullying in the workplace.
- Use the words lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc. It will make LGBT workers feel less invisible and will teach others to use these words.
- See and treat LGBT people as whole people. Acknowledge LGBT people, as we do with heterosexual people, when they talk about their families and their lives.
- Recognize that all of us, including LGBT people, talk about our social lives. We are not flaunting our heterosexuality. By the same token, we are not flaunting our homosexuality or bisexuality.
- Avoid assumptions about a person’s sexual orientation.
- Respect the privacy of LGBT people and allow them the opportunity to “come out” when they decide they are ready. Don’t interfere with this decision by probing or asking inappropriate questions.

**Where can I get more information and resources that can help?**

- ONA's *Human Rights and Equity Guide* (found in the members' section of ONA's website under "Human Rights and Equity").
- *To Our Allies: Everything you ever wanted to know about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Issues*. Canadian Labour Congress, 2007 (available on-line at [www.caw.ca/en/3678.htm](http://www.caw.ca/en/3678.htm)).
- Networking and strategizing session for LGBT ONA members ("LGBT breakout session") at the annual Human Rights and Equity Caucus.
- Employer harassment and discrimination policies.
- ONA collective agreement (found in the members' section of ONA's website under "Publications").
- Ontario *Human Rights Code*.

**Contact your Bargaining Unit Human Rights and Equity Representative, Bargaining Unit President or your servicing Labour Relations Officer for further advice and support.**

**Sources:**

- *To Our Allies: Everything you ever wanted to know about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Issues*. Canadian Labour Congress, 2007.
- *A New Look at Homophobia and Heterosexism in Canada*. Canadian AIDS Society, 2003.