

Barriers to LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Despite Formalized Policies: A Sri Lankan Experience

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Abstract

This study explores the remaining obstacles to openness to LGBTIQ+ inclusion within a local organisational context (Pride-H) in which LGBTIQ+ inclusivity is formalized through LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy and practices. By delving into the complexities of achieving genuine workplace diversity and equality, the study sheds light on the obstacles that impede the organisation's efforts in promoting LGBTIQ+ acceptance. The qualitative research methods employed, particularly semi-structured in-depth interviews, enrich the study by capturing the nuanced experiences of individuals within Pride-H. The identified barriers encompass a range of challenges, including the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ individuals in personal spaces, the difficulties faced by closeted individuals, stakeholder reluctance, microaggressions, and the risks associated with stereotyping and unconscious biases. These barriers are not unique to Pride-H but reflect broader challenges encountered by organisations globally in their quest for true inclusivity. The study concludes by advocating for proactive measures by Pride-H to address these issues, positioning the organisation as a model for others seeking to champion equality and diversity. The study calls for a harassment-free and non-discriminatory workplace and underscores the need for comprehensive efforts in reshaping organisational culture and attitudes, beyond mere policy implementation.

Keywords: Diversity, Equality, Exclusion, Inclusion, LGBTIQ+, Microaggression, Non-discrimination, Obstacles, Organisation, Policy, Practice, Workplace

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Introduction

Sri Lankan society takes a conservative stance on gender and sexuality. Accordingly, in Sri Lanka, sexual conservatism regulates individuals through gender roles based on a rigid male/female binary construct; sex is limited by a “logic of reproduction” (CPIN, 2018). Sri Lanka is one of seventy-two nations worldwide where homosexual relations/sodomy between consenting adults is illegal (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The anti-sodomy laws stipulated under

English law have made homosexuality illegal in the Sri Lankan legal system. According to the Penal Code Sections 365 and 365A, homosexuality is considered a “carnal intercourse against the order of nature (i.e., any type of sex that is considered unnatural)” and “any act of gross indecency with another person, respectively, which are interpreted to encompass all non-heterosexual acts and gender-variant states of being” (Ellawala, 2019, p.88). In addition, The Vagrancy Law, and Section 399 of the Penal Code, which deal with “cheating by personation” (i.e., impersonation), are also used against the LGBTIQ+ community in Sri Lanka, particularly against transgender people (Chowdhury, 2021). These legal sanctions further legitimize the social constraints on homosexuality and promote sexual stigma in the country (Adikaram and Liyanage, 2021). Amidst the legal and social barriers to homosexual affairs, LGBTIQ+ employees in the country face numerous challenges at work.

Transphobia and homophobia are expressed in various ways in Sri Lankan workplace cultures: directly, indirectly, vertically, horizontally, and structurally. Direct verbal or physical harassment, nonverbal signals in the workplace, administrative actions, and workplace norms and rules are all possibilities (Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development, 2017, p.39). The above facts reveal the stigma and inequality directed toward LGBTIQ+ workers in Sri Lankan workplaces. Because of ingrained biases in society and organisations, LGBTIQ+ employees in Sri Lanka fear for their jobs and lives (Rathnayake, 2021). Employees who identify as LGBTIQ+ in Sri Lanka confront numerous obstacles at work (Adikaram and Liyanage, 2021). They frequently experience discrimination when applying for jobs, getting promotions, receiving different employment benefits, and dealing with various difficulties (Chowdhury, 2021). According to a survey by Equal Ground (2021), 38% of LGBTIQ+ employees do not work in an environment that is friendly and non-discriminatory. Regarding job opportunities and benefits, 16% had been discriminated against during job interviews, 10% had been denied employment benefits (such as salary increases, promotions, or transfers), and 3% had been fired because of their sexual orientation or gender identity expression.

However, globally, there is a growing demand for businesses to address diversity and inclusion within their workplaces through diversity and inclusion policies and practices. To comply with global business and human rights standards and foster change, many organisations implement diversity management (DM) practices to improve equity and equality at work. Accordingly, several organisations in the Sri Lankan corporate sector have disclosed their LGBT-inclusive policy and practices to their stakeholders. In contexts such as Sri Lanka, where same-sex relations remain criminalised, organisational inclusion efforts are embedded within broader institutional constraints. These macro-level forces shape workplace practices, reinforcing heteronormative structures despite formal commitments to diversity (Scott, 2014; Meyer, 2003). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it addresses a critical gap by examining the persistence of exclusionary practices within organisations that have already formalized LGBTIQ+ inclusive policies, a context that remains underexplored in existing research. Second, it advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating how stigma, heteronormativity, and institutional pressures interact to sustain subtle forms of exclusion despite formal policy commitments. Third, it provides empirical insights from a Global South context, where legal and socio-cultural constraints intensify the challenges of translating inclusion policies into practice (Meyer, 2003; Herek et al., 2007; Ahmed, 2012). Accordingly, this research explores the persistent barriers to the enactment of LGBTIQ+ inclusion within a local organisational context in which LGBTIQ+ inclusivity is formalized through LGBTIQ+

inclusive policy and practices. The research primarily addresses two research questions: (1) What barriers persist despite formalized LGBTIQ+ inclusive policies? (2) How do organisational, societal, and institutional forces interact to sustain these barriers?

Literature Review

The growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion has positioned LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion as an important area of scholarly and practical concern. While existing literature has extensively documented discrimination, stigma, and exclusion faced by LGBTIQ+ employees, much of this research has focused on contexts where inclusion policies are absent or underdeveloped (Ozeren, 2014; Sterzing et al., 2017). Comparatively less attention has been paid to organisational contexts where LGBTIQ+ inclusive policies are formally established, yet exclusionary practices persist in subtle and complex ways. This gap is particularly pronounced in non-Western and legally restrictive environments, where broader institutional and socio-cultural forces shape workplace dynamics (Adikaram & Liyanage, 2021; Meyer, 2003). To address this gap, the present study organises the literature around four key conceptual lenses of ‘stigma’, ‘disclosure and identity management’, ‘microaggressions’, and ‘institutional resistance’ to provide a comprehensive understanding of how barriers to inclusion are reproduced despite formal policy commitments.

Stigma and Heteronormativity in the Workplace

LGBTIQ+ individuals are becoming increasingly prominent in the workplace. Progressive employers understand the importance of attracting people from all walks of life and cultivating a workplace culture that values diversity and equality and represents the society in which they operate (Stonewall, 2010). However, sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination are still frequent in private and public sector organisations (Sterzing et al., 2017; Nair et al., 2019). Because of apparent non-conformity with heteronormativity—the social notion that being heterosexual is “normal”—and stereotypes of how women and men are expected to behave, discrimination, harassment, and exclusion from the labour force are experienced by sexual minorities (ILO, 2012). This non-conformity constructs non-heterosexual identities as abnormal and produces stigma.

Stigma is a social construct based on prejudice or negative stereotyping that causes others in society to treat people with stigmatising qualities with contempt and negativity in everyday encounters (Burke, 2007). Indeed, individuals whose religious views identify LGBTIQ+ people as having improper or aberrant lives constitute a primary obstacle to workplace inclusion (Zugelder & Champagne, 2018). Dealing with deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes remains a significant challenge for contemporary businesses (Cunningham, 2011; Woods, 2011; Fullerton, 2013). These prejudices often manifest in discriminatory organisational practices, particularly in recruitment. For example, homosexual applicants are frequently rated lower than their heterosexual counterparts in competence, social skills, and suitability (Bryant-Lees & Kite, 2019).

Furthermore, negative attitudes toward homosexuality, beliefs that sexual orientation is a choice, and adherence to traditional gender roles significantly influence recruitment decisions for homosexual applicants (Bryant-Lees & Kite, 2019). Compared to other diversity characteristics,

sexual orientation remains the so-called “last acceptable and remaining prejudice” in modern organisations (Ozeren, 2014). Thus, stigma, heterosexism, and sexual prejudice collectively sustain systemic inequalities faced by LGBTIQ+ employees, highlighting the need for inclusive organisational cultures.

Disclosure and Identity Management

Coworkers’ adverse reactions represent another crucial challenge faced by LGBTIQ+ employees. LGBTIQ+ individuals are often subjected to unfavourable responses from heterosexual coworkers, shaped by emotional threat perceptions and beliefs rooted in religion and social norms (Ragins, 2004). Some coworkers assume that LGBTIQ+ individuals could avoid discrimination by choosing heterosexuality, reflecting deeply embedded homophobia. Emotional reactions may also arise from perceived threats associated with homosexuality, whether physical or symbolic (Hays-Thomas, 2017). Additionally, LGBTIQ+ employees often face limited social support in forming and expressing their identities (Ragins, 2004).

Such workplace climates discourage openness and encourage identity concealment. There is considerable opposition to LGBTIQ+ inclusion, creating environments where individuals refrain from disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity and instead “pass” as heterosexual (Ellis, 2009). To conform to heterosexist norms, gay employees may behave more masculinely, while lesbian employees may adopt more feminine behaviours (Ozeren, 2014). As a result, many individuals conceal their identities and adopt socially acceptable behaviours in the workplace. This concealment leads to complex identity management processes. Some LGBTIQ+ employees choose not to disclose their sexual orientation at work due to fear of stigma and discrimination, even if they are open in their private lives (Clair et al., 2005). This creates “disclosure disconnects,” where individuals maintain different levels of openness across domains (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). Such disconnects may result in sexual identity conflict, particularly when individuals are open in one domain but not in another (Ragins, 2004, 2008). Managing multiple identities requires significant emotional effort and may lead to psychological distress and disengagement at work (Lipka, 2010). Disclosure is therefore not a binary process but occurs along a continuum shaped by contextual factors. These dynamics create important diversity management challenges related to employee well-being and organisational inclusion (Sabat et al., 2014). The decision to conceal or disclose identity is influenced by multiple factors. Fear of discrimination remains the primary reason for concealment (Duffy & Visconti, 2014). Additional factors include concerns about career advancement, lack of visible LGBTIQ+ role models, prior experiences of discrimination, and workplace cultures characterised by “macho” or religious attitudes (Wright et al., 2006).

However, disclosure is associated with positive outcomes. Employees who are open about their sexual orientation report higher job satisfaction and engagement (Colgan et al., 2007; Drydakis, 2014; Salter & Sasso, 2021). Being open can reduce identity conflict and foster stronger interpersonal relationships at work (Day & Schoenrade, 2000). Moreover, individuals who openly accept their identity are more active in coping with stigma compared to those who remain closeted (Liyanage & Adikaram, 2019). Thus, overcoming identity concealment is beneficial for both employees and organisations.

Microaggressions and Subtle Discrimination

Beyond overt discrimination, LGBTIQ+ employees frequently experience subtle and everyday forms of bias. Microaggressions, which are defined as ‘brief and commonplace verbal, behavioural, or environmental slights’, represent a pervasive form of discrimination in workplaces (Sue et al., 2007; Nair et al., 2019). These acts are often unintentional but communicate hostile or negative messages toward marginalised groups. Microaggressions can take the form of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). While microassaults are explicit, microinsults and microinvalidations are more subtle and often normalized within organisational cultures. Such subtle discrimination is particularly difficult to identify and address, yet it significantly affects the psychological well-being and work experiences of LGBTIQ+ employees. Even in organisations that implement diversity and inclusion policies, microaggressions may persist due to underlying cultural norms and unconscious biases (Colgan et al., 2007). Therefore, understanding microaggressions is essential to explain why formal inclusion policies do not always translate into inclusive lived experiences.

Institutional Resistance and Policy–Practice Gaps

While organisations increasingly adopt diversity and inclusion policies, resistance to LGBTIQ+ inclusion persists at multiple levels. Institutional and societal norms play a significant role in shaping workplace practices. In many contexts, cultural and religious beliefs reinforce heteronormativity, limiting the effectiveness of formal inclusion policies.

Opposition to LGBTIQ+ inclusion is often embedded within broader institutional structures, creating a gap between formal policy commitments and actual workplace practices. Such resistance may arise from both internal stakeholders (e.g., employees and managers) and external stakeholders (e.g., communities and business partners), particularly in conservative socio-cultural contexts.

Thus, while policies signal organisational commitment to inclusion, they may not be sufficient to transform deeply embedded norms and practices. This highlights the importance of examining how institutional forces interact with organisational initiatives, leading to persistent barriers despite formal inclusion efforts.

Methodology

Pride Holdings (Pride-H - a pseudonym used to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the company) has consistently taken a progressive stance when recognizing workplace diversity throughout its one-hundred-and-fifty-year history. Pride-H is a local group conglomerate that operates many strategic business units in different sectors employing more than twenty thousand employees. They take pride in identifying themselves as an inclusive company with a history of promoting non-discrimination and anti-harassment within their working environment. They had formalized anti-harassment and non-discrimination in the internal policy framework. As a highly performance-driven company, rather than pondering about the personal grounds of the individuals, they have achieved tremendous success as a local organisation. Diversity and inclusion were vital subjects throughout the history of Pride-H. For example, if we refer to their policies like equal opportunity, code of conduct, and non-discrimination policy, they have been

in place for about twenty years. They have clear policies and guidelines regarding zero tolerance of harassment and discrimination. However, till 2015, the non-discrimination and anti-harassment policy did not specifically address LGBTIQ+ employees. The policies had not demarcated boundaries beyond gender, age, ethnicity, political affiliation, and being differently abled.

Nevertheless, in 2015, the Executive Director of a community organisation that works for LGBTIQ+ community rights requested the leadership team of Pride-H to discuss the importance of including LGBTIQ+ terminology in the non-discrimination policies. Since the company did not have a policy that specifically addressed sexual orientation and gender identity expression, in 2015, the company brought gender identity and sexual orientation into the policy in collaboration with two prominent LGBTIQ+ community organisations. It made efforts to become a truly inclusive company. Being fully aware of the Penal Code 365, 365-A, which illegalises homosexuality in the country, they absorbed LGBTIQ+ terminology into their policies since their premise, culture, and foundation integrated respect and value for diversity and inclusion over a more extended period.

Pride-H was selected as a revelatory case (Yin, 2014), as it provides a unique opportunity to examine the persistence of exclusion within an organisation that has formally institutionalized LGBTIQ+ inclusive policies.

In this study, under the ontological stance, I embraced multiple realities by looking at various types of data from individuals' viewpoints and experiences. Being an interpretive study, inevitably, the qualitative approach is used as the method of inquiry to meet the objectives of this study. I recognized the exploratory case study strategy (Yin, 1993) as the most appropriate strategy for designing this research. The rationale for choosing the case study design was to get a holistic understanding of the phenomenon through a thorough investigation and successfully cope with the phenomenon's inherent complexity.

Obtaining a wide range of insights from organisational and non-organisational players is important because the study uses the case study strategy. As shown in Table 1, a total of sixteen (16) participants were selected for the study using the purposive sampling method. In selecting the participants, I expected a mix of the organisation's different levels and functions. Additionally, I interviewed a director of a community organisation who was actively involved when Pride-H introduced its Diversity and Inclusive policy.

To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, it was used pseudonyms.

Table 01: Participants in the study

Positional Level	Name (pseudonyms)	Position
Senior Management	Kalani	Assistant Vice President
	Meena	Assistant Vice President
Functional Management	Dilshan	DE & I Policy Developer- Head of Group HR

	Ruvini	DE & I Policy Developer- Head of Corporate Communication
	Vishwa	HR Head (BU- A)
	Heshan	HR Head (BU- B)
	Velma	HR Manager
	Sudesh	HR Head (BU- C)
	Diana	HR Head (BU- D)
	Pubudu	HR Manager
	Mahesh	HR Manager
Executive Employees	Rashitha	Employee- Finance
	Veronica	Employee- HR
	Amali	Employee- Accounting
	Pasindu	Employee- HR
	Daniel	Leader- LGBTIQ+ Community Organisation

In this study, I gathered data through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted around 30-45 minutes for each. All the interviews were conducted online, as face-to-face interviews using the Zoom platform.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Coding involved iterative open coding, followed by axial categorization to identify patterns, and selective coding to refine overarching themes. The refined themes are LGBT exclusion in personal spaces, negative reactions of some stakeholders, closeted LGB individuals, microaggressions, stereotypes and unconscious biases.

The researcher acknowledges their positionality as an academic engaging with a sensitive topic, which requires reflexive awareness to minimize bias during data interpretation. Further, given the sensitivity of the topic, particular care was taken to ensure psychological safety, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, especially considering potential risks associated with disclosure.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Pride-H has implemented an LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy and practice, making a bold decision in the Sri Lankan corporate sector. In their journey, they faced different obstacles, and still, they are dealing with several obstacles regarding LGBTIQ+ diversity and inclusion. The company gradually addressed the obstacles under control, but still, some areas are beyond the company's control. Some obstacles are challenging to eradicate because they are deeply embedded in the systems.

LGBTIQ+ exclusion in personal spaces

In Pride H, it was revealed that the organisational members are ready to accept LGBTIQ+ individuals and treat them equally at work. However, the participants revealed some specific areas in which the organisational members still feel uncomfortable when working with LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Nevertheless, recently we did a survey asking questions like, “Would you be comfortable sharing a room with the LGBTIQ+ community when going on a staff trip... would you be comfortable with sharing a washroom...” I think that gets down to a little more detail, and the result of that questionnaire shows that they welcome the community, but there may be some personal uncomfortableness in a few areas. (Dilshan- PD)

The company has also done an internal survey and has identified that even though the organisational members are ready to welcome the LGBTIQ+ community, they show reluctance in instances such as sharing washrooms or sharing a room during an office trip. Such personal discomfort is depicted in certain areas, especially in sharing personal spaces and washrooms.

They have no problem sitting next to an LGBTIQ+ person doing something. However, when it gets a little more within their personal space, some of them, I think, might feel uncomfortable. (Ruvini- PI)

As Ruvini says, the employees of Pride-H do not feel reluctant to sit next to an LGBTIQ+ person and work with him or her. However, sharing dormitories or a room during an office trip, they feel uncomfortable with LGBTIQ+ individuals.

I think people might feel a bit uncomfortable with this, something I know about washrooms. Because if you know, let us say if it is a transgender person and knowing that when you go to the washroom, [...] Uh, I feel that there might be a little bit of a difficult... there can be certain uncomfortable situations when it comes to the washroom, but you know, lunchrooms or any other office space, and I do not feel fear or issue when sharing with LGBTIQ+. (Amali- EMP)

Amali constructs the same idea that previous participants started. She straightforwardly mentions that she will feel a bit uncomfortable when sharing the washroom, knowing that a person is a transgender person, even though she does not feel any anxiety about sharing office space or a lunchroom with an LGBTIQ+ person.

Thus, in terms of sharing personal spaces and washrooms other than the office spaces, the organisational members still show anxiety towards LGBTIQ+ individuals. This can be reflected in terms of “cisgender privilege”. Access to gender-segregated areas such as restrooms, changing rooms, and sports teams are some instances of cisgender privilege (Price & Skolnik, 2017). This discomfort reflects the persistence of cisnormative assumptions embedded in organisational practices, reinforcing exclusion even within formally inclusive environments (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Transgender employees still face discrimination when using gender-segregated spaces compared to cisnormative binary gender categories.

Negative reactions of some stakeholders

Pride-H is gradually addressing the resistance that arises from different parties. Almost all the internal stakeholders have already got into LGBTIQ+ inclusivity, but some external stakeholders show adverse reactions.

In the beginning, Pride-H also faced subtle pushback from its internal stakeholders. As Dilshan says,

It is not easy at all, and in the discussions that we have with people and when we have our awareness sessions, there is a large community who still do not feel right about it, who push back, who argue, who debate, and sometimes not openly, but sometimes subtly. Because some people are uncomfortable, I think it is essential to accept that fact, and we have had many conversations where we have been pushed back and said, "What are you trying to do? This is against religion". You know various things, but we believe we are making progress; the amount of pushback we are getting is less and less now. (Dilshan- PD)

The main argument of the parties who oppose LGBTIQ+ inclusivity is that it does not align with the Sri Lankan culture and goes against religion. Since the company is in a strong position as they are making progress and continuously raising awareness, they have now managed such resistance from the internal stakeholders.

One of the suppliers said, "Why do you want to get into this? This [homosexuality] is not in our culture". However, we are fine with that. We do not have to agree with it, everyone. If someone wishes to not deal with us because of a particular stand that we have, that is fine with us, they can choose to do that, but we have the integrity to communicate everything we do so that people can choose for themselves. (Ruvini- PD)

Again, the same argument was made by a supplier of Pride-H. The company can make a minimal impact in changing the stances of its external stakeholders, like suppliers. Moreover, again, the company seriously holds on to the company's stance on LGBTIQ+ inclusivity.

One of the other things we find is that people sitting in Colombo in certain senior management positions assumed that it would not be practical. Because the non-urban culture is different, right now, they assume, saying no, we cannot hire someone like that for an outlet because the village people will not like it and things like that. (Ruvini- PD)

Because sometimes, it might be more sensitive. As I said in Colombo, it is not a big deal for us. However, if you look at a rural factory environment and someone reveals that he or she is a lesbian or gay and something comes out, it might be a more significant concern. Because I think given our culture, you cannot be too open about it. I think we must strike a balance. (Dilshan-PD)

The adverse reaction from the rural community is identified as a severe barrier to establishing LGBTIQ+ inclusivity in the factories and outlets out of Colombo. As Ruvini says, at the beginning of formalizing LGBTIQ+ inclusivity, some senior managers in the Pride-H's branches out of Colombo had expressed it would not be practical. Still, they are reluctant to hire LGBTIQ+ individuals who are open because those managers are fear of the resistance which could come from the local community. Dilshan also emphasizes the difficulty of promoting LGBTIQ+

inclusivity within rural factory environments. Because being homosexual or transgender is still a more significant concern in rural Sri Lanka.

Several senior managers who oversee the Pride-H's branches outside of Colombo are hesitant to hire openly LGBTIQ+ people because of the fear of facing opposition from the local population. It denotes how challenging it is to advocate for LGBTIQ+ inclusivity in rural factory settings because it is still a more significant issue in rural Sri Lanka to be homosexual or transgender. The organisation has a very limited ability to change the behaviours of mass society. However, the organisation can modify the behaviours of internal parties. Heterosexual individuals who accept and support gays and lesbians, known as "allies," can contribute to a far more inclusive workplace (Martinez & Hebl, 2010). Thus, organisations can promote ally groups within the organisation to provide much more social and emotional support to LGBTIQ+ employees.

Closeted LGBTIQ+ individuals

Even though the company welcomes LGBTIQ+ individuals, formalizes inclusivity via a policy, and fosters LGBTIQ+ inclusivity in the workplace, the tendency of LGBTIQ+ individuals to come out at work is still low. Again, there is limited control over the organisation in this factor. Coming out at work is up to the LGBTIQ+ individual. However, the decision of LGBTIQ+ individuals to be in the closet might be inspired by the different social conditions rather than the company's environment. For instance, to conform to society's mandatory heterosexist norms, gay employees behave more masculinely, while lesbian employees behave more femininely (Ozeren, 2014). Some LGBTIQ+ employees do not expose themselves as homosexuals in the workplace (due to fear of stigma and discrimination), but in their private lives, they do. It takes much emotional energy to live a double life in the public and private arenas (Clair et al., 2005). However, this emotional energy to live a double life ultimately may negatively impact individual and organisational performance.

They do not come out openly. So, I am not sure whether somebody is gay or transgender. (Rashitha- EMP)

Now, even if we go for international insurance agents' awards nights and all that, we see people who seem to be like (different gender expressions) getting awards. Nevertheless, here, I have never seen such. (Meena- SM)

As Rashitha and Meena say, LGBTIQ+ employees in the company rarely come out. Compared to their international agents, LGBTIQ+ individuals in Sri Lanka working in Pride-H show a lower tendency to come out.

Any minority anywhere in the world, so first, they should come forward. Moreover, even within Sri Lanka, many organisations are ready to accept these people. The only thing on their side is that there is a bit of reluctance to come out. We are ready to treat you equally. However, they must come forward. (Mahesh- HRM)

According to Mahesh, if any LGBTIQ+ individual needs support at work, they should come forward if they are suppressed due to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Yeah, because I am pretty sure there might be complaints about female harassment. Because you know that person is a female. Nevertheless, LGBTIQ+ might think ten times before complaining, saying I am LGBTIQ+ because maybe that is the instance where we get to know about the person. So, those are the problems that we are trying to address immediately. (Meena- SM)

As Meena says, the LGBTIQ+ person's fear of being revealed is due to different reasons. Even when they face harassment, they keep silent because the person thinks that his or their sexual orientation will be exposed if the person makes a complaint.

Even though I started to research, I did not know any single person who was out as LGBTIQ+ at the beginning. But yes, a considerable amount of people out there. We must have that inclusivity. However, what is essential from my research is not being silent about it but showing active support for it, which we lack. (Meena- SM)

Meena conducted research for her MBA investigating the workplace climate for LGBTIQ+ individuals. Starting the research without knowing any single LGBTIQ+ person who is open at work, subsequently, she realizes there is a considerable amount of LGBTIQ+ individuals, but they still need a strong voice and active support.

There should be a commitment from the sides of both employers and LGBTIQ+ individuals to make LGBTIQ+ individuals visible and eliminate the sexual identity conflict. While organisations provide recognition, support, and a voice for LGBTIQ+ individuals, they should be confident and trust themselves and the organisation.

“Closeted LGBTIQ+ individuals” is another significant issue the organisation is trying to tackle. In a nation like Sri Lanka, where same-sex relationships between consenting adults have been criminalised and carry many stigmas, coming out in the workplace can be challenging (Chowdhury, 2021). Both businesses and LGBTIQ+ individuals need to commit to making LGBTIQ+ people visible and eliminating sexual identity conflict. Fear of discrimination is the primary reason why many LGBTIQ+ individuals opt to conceal their sexual orientation at work (Duffy and Visconti, 2014). Gay employees behave more masculinely, whereas lesbian employees behave more femininely to adapt to society's required heterosexist norms (Ozeren, 2014). As a result, many employees attempt to conceal their sexual orientation or simply “pass” as one. They are more inclined to use identification procedures that they believe to be “accepted” at work. Maintaining a dual existence in public and private spheres requires a lot of emotional stamina (Clair et al., 2005). While organisations give LGBTIQ+ people visibility, voice, and support, they should maintain self-assurance and trust in the organisation. “Sexual identity conflict” occurs when an LGBTIQ+ worker admits their sexual orientation in one setting but not another (Ragins, 2008; Ragins, 2004; Ozturk and Tatly, 2016). The most blatant instances of sexual identity conflict occur when there are significant “disclosure disconnects” or when a person has been revealed to everyone else in one domain but no one else in another (Ragins, 2004). These counterfeiting identity management techniques may lead to psychological suffering and disengagement at work (Lipka, 2010). Disclosure disconnects lead to unique diversity management concerns focused on employee well-being because of psychological

stress, work conflict, attributional uncertainty, and a need to construct consistent identities across life domains (Ragins, 2008; Sabat et al., 2014). Thus, the sexual identity conflict due to the dual identity of the LGBTIQ+ individuals is challenging Pride-H to reap the real advantage of its LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy and practice.

Microaggressions

Even organisations that reform equality and diversity policies and practices for sexual minorities do not always ensure a working environment that recognizes and supports sexual minorities or prohibits homophobic attitudes and behaviour across the board (Colgan et al., 2007). Prevailing “microaggressions” for sexual minorities is one possible reason for such a consequence. Microaggressions denote a subtle form of bias and discrimination, such as slights, snubs, or perceived insults directed toward minorities (Nair et al., 2018). Microaggressions can be broadly divided into three categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). Microassaults are classified as explicit derogatory acts, mostly verbal or nonverbal, to harm the targeted victim through name-calling, avoidance, or deliberate discrimination (Sue et al., 2007). Microinsults and microinvalidations are typically subtler than microassaults (Resnick and Galupo, 2018). Harsh or insensitive communications denigrating a person’s identity are called microinsults (Sue et al., 2007). The recipient views the action as insulting, even if the perpetrator might not be aware of the microaggression (Resnick and Galupo, 2018). Finally, messages that discredit or invalidate the oppressed group’s psychological beliefs, emotions, or lived reality are referred to as microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007).

That is our most challenging area when we talk about verbal harassment, language, and the importance of language within the corporate sector. Because not touching, not squeezing, not hugging, not coming over, the physical stuff is very clean, using foul language. It does not mean that you cannot joke in your office anymore. It means that you must be mindful of who is in your office. That is what it means. It does not mean you cannot joke; perhaps those jokes are unacceptable in an office environment. (Daniel-Community Leader)

The language used by others toward LGBTIQ+ individuals could be a significant source of verbal harassment. Daniel refers to the entire Sri Lankan corporate sector. No participant from Pride-H did not expose any incident of discrimination or harassment against the sexual minorities at the company. Even though Pride-H has prohibited any verbal or physical harassment of anyone at the workplace, certain jokes or conversations might subtly discriminate against the LGBTIQ+ individuals. Sometimes it can be name-calling or avoidance. Pride-H should be deliberate to avoid such kinds of microassaults at work. Because microaggressions are possible even within LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy and practice adopted organisations.

I think we are not going just to do it in one night. It will be a gradual and incremental process. One might recruit one LGBTIQ+ person, then next month, there will be another. When people are used to it, I am not saying that there will not be any issues. There might be other joking and criticising. (Sudesh- HRM)

As Sudesh also mentioned, there might be joking and criticising. Eliminating these subtle forms of discrimination is more difficult than addressing overt discrimination. As Sudesh says, it should be done in a gradual, incremental process over time.

Nevertheless, if you look at resistance (in terms of occupying a transwoman after her transition), the younger people had absolutely no issue. They did not care whether the person was a man or woman or the skin colour. They did not care. They worked alongside me without any problem. However, some of the older people had difficulty coming on board, so they sometimes still called her by her previous male name. Furthermore, that became many issues when if she made a mistake in her job, it would always be a point that the fact. (Ruvini- PD)

Ruvini exemplifies an incident where microinvalidations could happen. According to Sue et al. (2007), micro invalidations imply that they discredit or invalidate the oppressed group's psychological beliefs, emotions, or lived reality. Calling a transwoman by her previous male name invalidates her as female to these older coworkers. They imply that they do not accept her living reality.

The supermarket staff had a query saying that when the customer is transgender, they did not know whether to call them Sir or Madam, so they wanted training. (Ruvini- PD)

The supermarket staff's unawareness about addressing a transgender customer might unconsciously produce microinvalidations towards such a customer. For instance, if the supermarket staff insensitively called Sir for a male whose gender expression is mainly a woman, it would create a microinvalidation for that person.

I think it is crucial because if your organisation needs to achieve performance, people should be able to reveal their identity. Because otherwise, they are making much effort to pass like an average person. We might be making remarks. Uh, which might be offensive to them, so only they know about it, right? So, because of all that, individual performance will be impacted, especially when working as a team. Team performance might be impacted. (Meena- SM)

As Meena emphasizes, the employees may make negative remarks about LGBTIQ+ people without knowing a colleague who is next to him or her is an LGBTIQ+ person. Then, such a person can feel uncomfortable and will keep the person close.

Even though I could not uncover the explicit discrimination or harassment within Pride-H, there is a risk of microaggressions. Microaggressions, which are brief and routine verbal, behavioural, or environmental slights that convey hostile, disparaging, or adverse slights and insults at marginalised persons, can be a type of discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people (Price and Skolnik, 2017). The microassaults and microinvalidations possibilities were revealed through participants' conversations. Microassaults are classified as explicit derogatory acts, primarily verbal or nonverbal, to harm the targeted victim through name-calling, avoidance, or deliberate

discrimination (Sue et al., 2007). Messages that discredit or invalidate the oppressed group's psychological beliefs, emotions, or lived reality are called microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). In the case of Pride-H, participants revealed the possibilities of unintentional joking and criticising toward LGBTIQ+ individuals (microassaults), a situation in which some employees call a transwoman by her previous male name (microinvalidation), and a lack of understanding of supermarket staff on correct pronouns for transgender customers (microinvalidation risks). The organisation must overcome specific obstacles to make Pride-H a fully inclusive, zero-discriminatory, and harassment-free environment.

Stereotypes and unconscious biases

Addressing long-held prejudices and stereotypes regarding LGBTIQ+ individuals is a challenge for businesses (Cunningham, 2011a; Woods, 2011; Fullerton, 2013). Bryant-Lees and Kite (2019) report the negative attitudes about homosexuality, beliefs about sexual orientation as a choice, and beliefs in traditional gender roles as significant predictors of hiring ratings for homosexual applicants but not heterosexual applicants. Thus, eradicating prevailing stereotypes about the LGBTIQ+ community and unconscious bias is a significant challenge to Pride-H.

The thing is, when we are considering the culture, the Sri Lankan culture, I see that this is not fit for the Sri Lankan culture. However, the world is going with this (recognizing LGBTIQ+). Otherwise, we will get cornered in the world. (Sudesh- HRM)

These thoughts of Sudesh imply his perception that LGBTIQ+ is a western concept. Sudesh perceives LGBTIQ+ as a taken-for-granted thing to the company rather than an excellent reason to adopt.

If someone is LGBTIQ+... for example, the person applies for a job. Moreover, if that person is qualified for that job, I think we will give that employment regardless of whether that person is LGBTIQ+ or not. Nevertheless, there can be, you know, interviewer biases. All those things might come into play, but as a company, our stance is that even if that person is LGBTIQ+, we will give them employment opportunities. (Meena- SM)

The awareness of the possible biases (e.g., halo effect and horn effect) from the interviewers are vital. Meena is aware of the biases which could be underpinned in the recruitments. The policy addresses these biases. Prioritization of qualifications other than personal characteristics is emphasized for the organisational members.

There is another side called unconscious biases. For example, when conducting recruitment interviews, although we consider all the professional qualifications, sometimes there can be an unconscious bias within that person. Therefore, as a specialized team, we teach them how to control their unconscious biases. We teach them the way to put effort into avoiding unconscious biases deliberately. (Pasindu- EMP)

Already, the company has initiated a program to drive out unconscious biases. Being conscious of unconsciousness is the best way to avoid unconscious bias from individuals. Thus, Pride-H gives awareness to the relevant parties to control and avoid unconscious bias. A specialized internal team teaches the executive how to drive out unconscious bias.

So, what I meant by Pride-H supermarkets is doing a traditional commercial. Our commercial would show the lady washing dishes in the kitchen while the husband reads a newspaper. However, I would try to switch those roles, and I would like to see the man washing dishes while the ladies come home. Even if I am using a young girl and a young boy, I prefer not to use them in stereotypical colours of clothing or roles. So now we try to integrate it into what we do. (Kalani- SM)

According to Kalani, the traditional commercials done by the company reproduce gender stereotypes. As she emphasizes, this should be changed. When she and her group design commercials, they switch the traditional domestic gender roles. They challenge the traditional domestic gender segregation at work. Moreover, they try to challenge traditional gender norms.

Addressing long-held prejudices and stereotypes regarding LGBTIQ+ individuals is a challenge for businesses (Cunningham, 2011a; Woods, 2011; Fullerton, 2013). Since unconscious bias and traditional stereotypes are essential barriers to diversity, the organisation has tried to eradicate them among organisational members. Stereotyping forms an incomplete, oversimplified, and frequently unfavourable mental image of a person's interactions with members of another group and, occasionally, of their own (Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994). Even when no individual bias or discrimination exists, heterosexual and cisgender beliefs are reflected in work environments and institutional policies that work against sexual minority groups (Herek et al., 2007). The company has taken significant initiatives to drive out the organisational members' traditional stereotypes, and unconscious bias since those are potent obstacles to diversity. Nevertheless, I could still identify some negative signs of some participants regarding LGBTIQ+ inclusivity (e.g., LGBTIQ+ is a Western thing that does not fit with our culture).

Organisational members at Pride-H demonstrate a readiness to accept LGBTIQ+ individuals in the workplace; however, discomfort arises in personal spaces, such as shared dormitories or restrooms during office trips. This reflects the persistence of cisnormative assumptions and gendered space segregation, where access to gendered spaces remains structured by binary norms, reinforcing subtle exclusion despite formal inclusion (Herek et al., 2007; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). External stakeholders, particularly in rural settings, express resistance to LGBTIQ+ inclusivity, citing cultural and religious reasons. Some internal stakeholders initially opposed the initiative but gradually aligned with the organisational stance. This demonstrates how institutional and societal pressures shape organisational practices, especially in contexts where dominant cultural norms and legal frameworks reinforce heteronormativity (Meyer, 2003; Scott, 2014). Despite organisational efforts to eradicate traditional stereotypes and unconscious biases, some participants still harbor negative perceptions, considering LGBTIQ+ as a Western concept incompatible with Sri Lankan culture. These perceptions reflect deeply embedded stigma and heteronormative ideologies, which persist even within formally inclusive environments (Ahmed, 2012; Goffman, 1963).

Subtle forms of bias and discrimination, known as microaggressions, persist within Pride-H, including unintentional joking, criticising, and instances where transgender individuals are not addressed by their preferred pronouns. These reflect everyday forms of discrimination that are often normalized and difficult to detect, yet significantly impact marginalised individuals (Nair et al., 2019; Sue et al., 2007). Despite a welcoming environment, LGBTIQ+ employees at Pride-H are hesitant to come out, fearing discrimination and stigma. The decision to remain closeted is influenced by societal norms and the potential impact on individual and organisational performance. This aligns with the concept of sexual identity disclosure and minority stress, where individuals manage multiple identities across contexts to avoid stigma (Clair et al., 2005; Meyer, 2003; Ragins, 2008). These issues signal the Pride-H to be put an extra vigilance towards their work environment to make the organisation a fully inclusive and LGBTIQ+ friendly.

Conclusion

This study identifies five primary issues that need to be addressed: LGBTIQ+ exclusion in private areas, stakeholder resistance, closeted LGBTIQ+ people, dangers of microaggression and risks of stereotype and unconscious biases. The organisation has taken significant steps to eliminate traditional stereotypes and unconscious bias among organisational members. However, negative attitudes toward LGBTIQ+ inclusion still pertain subtly (e.g., LGBTIQ+ is a Western thing which not fit with our culture). Closeted LGB employees are another significant workplace challenge because it could lead to lower productivity when they are in a “double life.” Moreover, the organisational members still show anxiety towards transgender individuals in terms of sharing dormitories, restrooms, and washrooms other than the office spaces. LGBTIQ+ inclusivity in rural factory settings is still a more significant issue in rural Sri Lanka, whether one is homosexual or transgender. The potential risk of microaggressions is another significant challenge. In the case of Pride-H, participants revealed the possibilities of microassaults and microinvalidation risks. Pride-H needs to go beyond a few challenges to turn Pride-H into a fully inclusive, harassment-free, and zero-discriminatory environment.

Pride-H can implement strategies to address the issues raised and move the organisation closer to becoming a truly inclusive and discrimination-free workplace in light of the thorough results of this study. The organisation needs to step up its efforts to debunk myths about LGBTIQ+ inclusion and emphasize that diversity and inclusion are universal principles that cut across cultural barriers to counteract the subtly pervasive negative sentiments toward them. Given the possible effects on well-being and productivity, the issue of closeted LGB personnel requires special consideration. Establishing a secure environment for candid communication and avenues for assistance can help promote a work environment in which people are not driven to live “double lives.”

Furthermore, the fear associated with transgender people calls for a thorough education effort that dispels myths and prejudices while fostering acceptance and understanding. Particularly in rural factory settings, where acceptance and tolerance are harder to come by, specific programs need to be put in place to help close the gap. Finally, preventing the dangers of microaggressions necessitates taking preventative measures, such as awareness campaigns and training initiatives that promote a respectful and sensitive culture. By taking proactive measures to address these problems, Pride-H may become a completely harassment-free, zero-discriminatory workplace that sets the standard for other organisations supporting equality and diversity.

This study is subject to several limitations that provide avenues for future research. First, the study is based on a single case organisation, which may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond similar organisational and socio-cultural contexts. Future studies could adopt comparative or multi-case designs across different industries or countries to enhance external validity. Second, the limited representation of openly LGBTIQ+ employees (largely reflecting the broader context of invisibility and reluctance to disclose sexual identity) restricts direct insights into the lived experiences of sexual minorities. Future research should seek to incorporate more diverse and openly LGBTIQ+ voices, potentially through alternative or more confidential data collection approaches. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures experiences at a single point in time; longitudinal research could better examine how inclusion practices and employee experiences evolve over time. Finally, further research could deepen theoretical engagement by exploring the interplay between organisational policies and broader institutional forces, particularly in legally restrictive and non-Western contexts, to better understand how inclusion can be meaningfully enacted beyond formal policy commitments.

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