



International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The UN Migration Agency

IDAHOT 2017 - IOM staff quotes

17 May 2017

### Workplace Culture

**Coming to work at IOM I found an organization that in my experience has been nothing except welcoming, and open to advancing areas of greater understanding.** Early on I found ways to push through and raise the profile of LGBTI issues. I found a host of allies too, willing and steadfast in their support. Starting with the leadership of various departments and divisions: ICP (International Cooperation and Partnerships, MCD (Media and Communications), DOE (Operations and Emergencies), and right to the Office of the Director General (ODG). **One of the results is the first of its kind in the UN system, LGBTI Pulse Memorial Scholarship, which provides funding to LGBTI youth in pursuit of a university or college degree.** The second result is I think we have better positioned our organization publicly as standing with LGBTI communities. **There is no doubt that the organization is a champion of LGBTI issues and wants to do more.** I think IOM is well placed to provide leadership and influence with Member States, as complicated as this can be, in an effort to ensure greater protection for LGBTI migrants. In areas where this proves to be a daunting task and is a long-term vision at best, IOM can at the very least be a beacon of safety and hope to those who presently have little. - Daniel Szabo

**During a social gathering, an IOM staff member [in] senior management made a very homophobic joke in front of a number of other colleagues, myself and my same-sex partner...** Immediately after he made the joke, one of my colleagues had the decency to call him apart... He came back afterwards completely pale and speechless. He never apologized to us or other colleagues in the room. **I felt disgusted and extremely disappointed as I would have believed an "educated" person, Head of a HQ Division, would act according to the principles IOM...** People should realize jokes perpetuate stereotypes, perpetuate homo/transphobia [and] perpetuate ignorance.

We can give staff members [LGBTI] training, but we can't change their mindset. **Silent gestures, stigma, the cold shoulder and being excluded from social events are the main things that LGBTI colleagues face** in the IOM office environment.

Since I am Arab working in one of the most conservative Arab countries [where they] are not educated enough about LGBTI [people], **I have faced discrimination and prejudice since day one.** I have noticed that **as time went by and the staff got to know me** they started opening up to me about their pre-judgements and **some apologized and applauded me for my courage. Whilst others still avoid me and want nothing to do with me...** I am very pleased however with the management's full support of me, and that is what is important for any staff member whether LGBTI or not.

**One obvious challenge of being lesbian and living in the Middle East is reluctantly being prompted to go back into the closet** given that sexuality in general is far more private a topic here than in the West. While I never feared for my physical safety, **my wife and I have a lingering fear of disrupting professional relationships in the workplace if we disclosed our sexual orientation to local colleagues.**

I have been working for IOM Turkey for nearly two years. I have faced some challenges as I **work out of the office and in the field, most of the time in direct contact with legal authorities at the Airport.** Unfortunately, Turkish authorities like the Airport police tends to be discriminative towards LGBTI people. **As a gay man working with the police, this was a challenge for me. You have to put more effort than a non LGBTI colleague to build the trust for a well-functioning relationship between yourself and the partners you work with.** This can get very consuming..., especially when you already work very hard for your department and mission. Things are better and easier in our office when compared to the field, as most of the staff are welcoming and friendly towards LGBTI people.

**I wish straight IOM colleagues would realize how lucky they are talking openly about their husbands and wives, especially in countries where people are more conservative or homosexuality is against the dominant religion or considered a crime in the country.** I wish I could do the same as I love my partner very much and would like to talk about her all the time, but **there have been many occasions where I have said I was single because it's easier than trying to explain I have a partner or lying that my partner is male, instead of female. It makes me sad and lonely sometimes.**

**I am very grateful that IOM has recognized my partner as an official dependent. This was a big stress factor as we weren't sure my partner could join me in my new duty station.**

**While delivering a training on human rights issues in a field Mission, an IOM staff member approached me to inquiry whether IOM had any instructions regulating staff who "came to the office wearing dresses, even if they were men."** At first glance, and after dedicating some time to the needs of LGBTI migrants during the training, I thought he was referring to rules protecting colleagues to ensure they can dress according to their own gender identity... however, after checking with him, **he said the opposite: "no, IOM should have rules to ensure men dress 'accordingly,' they should not come to the office like this (wearing a dress), especially if they are at the front desk."**

**Being gay is not something I would normally expect to be relevant at work, but it's a daily consideration when working in the field.** Being of a diverse sexual orientation can not only affect my safety but it can also impact my ability to maintain effective relationships with counterparts and stakeholders who may not be tolerant of my sexual orientation. Hiding a core aspect of my identity at work has become a routine necessity, which is not something I would need to do in my home country.

I have learned to deal with the hostile environment towards LGBT people here, but many colleagues cite my openness as a sign that everything here is fine here for LGBT people. Consequently, **the biggest challenge that I face as an LGBT staff member at IOM is that my colleagues trivialize what happens to LGBT people here.** They say that that discrimination based on diverse sexual orientation and gender identity doesn't really exist at my duty station, and definitely not at IOM. Unfortunately they are wrong. Yes, we have respect and diversity posters up around the office, but when my colleagues say things like "that kind of thing doesn't happen here" or say bad experiences I have aren't related to being LGBT, it is as if those posters just seem to vanish off the walls as do the real struggles LGBT people like me face. **Trivializing or ignoring homophobia, biphobia and transphobia also trivializes and ignores LGBT people and just feeds into the cause of the problem: ignorance.**

**Changing cultural attitudes towards LGBT people takes time and although we may not be able to change the countries we work in, we can change how we work in them.** If you know an openly LGBT colleague, ask them if they are comfortable with sharing their experiences with homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia with you. **Try to listen, learn and be supportive. Be an ally!** Our experiences dealing with discrimination are real and affect us and our lives in and out of the office. The negative effects of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are not invisible and neither are we.

Only my closest friends and immediate family know I am gay. My mother asked me not to tell the extended family nor society at large, due to the discrimination I would face. When I started working at IOM, I didn't want to tell my national colleagues, and would only tell staff who weren't from my country. **In a homophobic society, you have to be careful about who you tell as it could be used to discriminate against you.** Some companies and even NGOs do not hire people if they know they are LGBTI. I started letting my IOM colleagues know gradually, and haven't been treated any differently since then. Some colleagues use derogatory language in everyday situations, such as the Spanish equivalent of 'faggot', as it is part of the culture, and a LGBTI colleague has experienced some harsh comments, but for me the staff at IOM have been very accepting. I wanted to work at the IOM to help. I do that here, working with beneficiaries. Sometimes even something as simple as a smile can make a big difference! **I would recommend IOM as a place to work for LGBTI people.**

Some colleagues know my sexual orientation, it may come up in conversation about my family, but the majority assume heterosexuality when I discuss my partner, or ask about my 'husband' or 'boyfriend'. I do not feel offended by this though, and I have not seen others from the LGBTI community mistreated here. **There are a couple of things the IOM could still do to ensure it is more inclusive, including: Gender neutral bathrooms and ensuring all staff members, support staff and contractors receive LGBTI training.**

**Being gay within the organisation can be difficult,** some people say and do some really horrible things, so you do have to be careful. **Thankfully, it is not hard to find really great and trustworthy people who respect you** and give you your own space to define your work and give you responsibility.

## **Family**

I am part of the LGBTI community. I live in a small city which is fairly open to LGBTI residents, including a large population of transsexual women. My partner and I are somewhat role models for the LGBTI community there as we prove you can have a 'normal' life and be LGBTI, including having a career and children. There is some discrimination, which goes with living in a chauvinistic society. **At the IOM, this is the first time my partner has been recognized as common law, and I was able to include her and our daughter on my health insurance. Previous organizations I worked for did not have that provision.**

**When I was going through the process of getting my partner recognized as a dependent, there was a lot of bureaucratic back-and-forth [that is not required of different-sex partners], requests for documents, etc. After four months Manila discovered ... all that was needed was a notarized affidavit. Luckily, Manila recognized my partner from the date of the initial request.**

**Starting a family as an international civil servant [in a same-sex couple] is a mind-numbing bureaucratic process. Adoption is next to impossible** due to laws enacted by many countries which bar single people or same-sex couples from adopting. Adoption in the home country may be possible for same-sex couples, but agencies require a lot of background information, psych evaluations, home visits, etc. - impossible for staff who are not working in their home countries. ... **Surrogacy in western countries is very expensive (up to USD 150,000) and IOM has no policies to help cover medical costs incurred by a surrogate or an egg donor.**

**Home Leave and family visits become complicated when the couple is bi-national and home leave must be at your home station every other time.** It doesn't always work out. Now with home leave moving to every two years, an added financial burden is placed on staff to see family in their country of nationality as well as their spouse's family in their home country at least once a year.

**While the UN supports same sex marriage, there are currently no frameworks that allow the provisioning of residency visas to spouses of LGBTI UN staff in countries where same sex marriage is not recognized...** This means that to see and be with my wife, she will need to apply for a tourist visa usually valid for one month from entry and can only be extended for another 30 days... **I am anxious each time my wife leaves the country because I don't really know when she will be able to come back.**

**When I think of my career path with IOM, I no longer think in terms of where I can go to develop my career; I think in terms of where my same-sex and gender non-conforming partner could go with me.** We are working on having children using a sperm donor – a process that is not easy outside of the US and Europe, and we don't have a lot of time left due to the fact that I spent the last ten years in hardship duty stations or countries with laws against homosexuality. And while we plan to get married, that doesn't mean she can get residency in the countries where I may be rotated. **While many IOM staff do rotations without their families, I have to consider that I may be separated from my family in both family and non-family duty stations.** Different-sex partners at least have the privilege of getting married and having that relationship honored in all family duty stations.

**I was recently surprised to learn my partner was not considered by IOM as my spouse for benefits, despite our registered partnership being fully recognized by our current country of residence. Through continued discussion, I was able to obtain clarity on the**

situation and encouraged to continue to seek an open dialogue and any possible resolution. The discussions proved worthwhile, as we were able to obtain confirmation from our country of origin that registered partnerships were recognized. Following this, **IOM corrected the record to reflect our spousal status. Had I not sought assistance and taken steps to rectify the situation, this change would not have occurred.** I am relieved and pleased to have achieved this positive outcome from a situation that initially appeared impossible.

## **Security**

**A colleague with whom I was sharing offices in Headquarters approached another colleague in a field Mission in a country where LGBTI [people] faced particularly challenges, to let her know I was gay... I approached her one day to inquiry why she would have “outed” me. She said it was a lie and denied it.** I knew she was lying, and I did not want to get in the game of “he/she” says, so I dropped the issue.

**In [16] years I have been posted or have been in long missions in at least 18 countries which criminalize homosexuality, and in many others where homosexuality is highly stigmatized or persecuted under different laws.** Some of these countries criminalize homosexual behavior, which is to a certain extent under my control. Others punish homosexuality as a state of being... **There is a very thin boundary between the willingness of a staff member to take a risk, and the safeguards the organization should put in place to avoid harm to its staff and its reputation,** and the organization and staff members’ commitments to the existing laws of countries where they are deployed.

**I think that LGBTI staff members’ deployments and missions in countries where homosexual behavior is punishable should count as double in calculation for mobility and rotation, because there is a limit to the limits we can put to an healthy sexual life.**

**Because IOM does not in general openly discuss or reach out to LGBTI staff members, many are reluctant to speak up when they face security issues,** whether in the workplace or in the country where they are posted. They don’t want to be outed in their offices, discriminated against by the leadership or deemed unsuitable for work in the field. **Some believe the only recourse they have is to leave IOM if the issues get too bad, rather than asking for help.**

I work in a country whose culture is homophobic, biphobic and transphobic. LGBT people are being killed, tortured, and silenced here. I am out about my diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and proud of it in my private and professional life despite the negative consequences it entails. Part of the reason I am “out” is because I know colleagues and beneficiaries who simply cannot live freely given the circumstances.