

Protecting the rights of LGBTIQ+ workers by unions and NGO's in five countries

How do unions in different countries deal with the working situation for LGBTIQ+ workers? That was the topic of a webinar organized by Mondiaal FNV on 5 September 2022. Union partners from the Netherlands, Indonesia, Lebanon, Peru and Sri Lanka all shared their experiences, just like Global Unions.

Until recently, Mondiaal FNV mainly focused on workers' rights with a focus on women. A few years ago, the organization started to pay more attention to the case of LGBTIQ+ workers. Mondiaal FNV and FNV started to support trade unions outside the Netherlands to work for the benefit of LGBTIQ+ workers and started to support the building of a network of LGBTIQ+ trade union activists. This was the first meeting of Mondiaal FNV partners from different parts of the world and from different sectors.

In Indonesia, the situation for LGBTIQ+ people is difficult and has been worsening over the last five years, explained the representative from the country. The province of Aceh in Indonesia has criminalized queer people because of the implementation of sharia laws (Islamic laws) while other provinces so far do not have regulations that criminalize queer people, but they do have local regulation at cities/districts level that criminalize queer people, particularly sodomy (homosexual) behavior and gender expression/identity towards trans people.

Campaigning on the rights of LGBTIQ+ people is difficult. More than 300 Indonesians were arrested in 2017 for 'queer associated behavior'. To support and protect LGBTIQ+ workers, an intersectional human rights approach is needed. Part of that is education on gender and sexuality. But also looking for allies in the media and amongst other trade unions. For some people in the LGBTIQ+ community it's about finding work. For other people, who already work, it's about fighting discrimination.

Lebanon has outdated labour laws that do not properly protect workers, said the representative of Lebanon. This became painfully clear again in the last few years during the Covid-19 crisis, the monetary crisis, and the aftermath of the Beirut harbor blast. The government has little power over the private sector, so working with labour unions became a reality when the focus was shifted on the right to work for the LGBTIQ+ community instead of on the identity.

The strategy is horizontal advocacy, where different organizations and trade unions work together to improve workers' rights, and therefore also LGBTIQ+ workers' rights. In this work it is important to de-emphasize identity; The focus in the next phase will be on the update of the labour law in order to be inclusive for different marginalized groups like people with disabilities, women etc.

The Peru representative pointed towards the conservative and masculine culture of the country. Because of this culture LGBTIQ+ people aren't safe both in the formal and the informal sector. The chosen strategy in Peru is internal education within the unions from the bottom up. A study was started to learn about LGBTIQ+ communities. Following this,

educational material and workshops were given within the union with the hope of creating awareness among the whole trade union network. The Peruvian union also reached out to the Dutch FNV Rainbow network to gain knowledge. Next to that, the unions try to create safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ working and non-working people in Peru.

In Sri Lanka, the union started having conversations about LGBTIQ+ in 2019. Most unions in Sri Lanka are linked to political parties. So, whenever unions strike it is mostly because they are linked to parties who are in opposition. Homosexuality is criminalized in Sri Lanka. Therefore, LGBTIQ+ people don't go to the police easily. Some progressive courts have been making decisions that protect LGBTIQ+ people from violence. To incorporate LGBTIQ+ people in their work, the union of the Sri Lanka representative has been actively reaching out to these communities to engage them in conversations. The union has also been a participant in protests in Colombo organized by LGBTIQ+ groups.

In the Netherlands there has been experience in the field for over 30 years. The Netherlands was the first country to legalize gay marriage. However, for the last five years the government hasn't done much to support LGBTIQ+ people in their work. The Netherlands isn't a leading country anymore, says the Dutch representative. In Europe, twelve countries are doing better on policies for LGBTIQ+ workers. The union tries to share information and connect with LGBTIQ+ groups. The union also openly shows their support to LGBTIQ+ groups. Intersectionality is also important in their work. By working with women's or immigrant groups the union can reach LGBTIQ+ people within those groups.

Lastly, the Global Unions shared how they try to support LGBTIQ+ workers. The representative pointed out that many countries still deal with the legacy of colonialism. In many African and Caribbean countries, criminalization of homosexuality is a consequence of British colonial rule. Global unions try to connect and support national, regional, and local affiliates. By building alliances, they also try to influence the global level. Global Unions point out that all working people are complex humans with different identities. Some workers are straight but have LGBTIQ+ partners or children. "These people also need support", said the representative of Global Unions.

Participating organizations in the panel:

Netherlands: FNV Rainbow Network

Lebanon: NGO's Lower and Helem

Peru: Trade Union Federation ABA-CGTP

Indonesia: Trade Union Sindikasi

Sri Lanka: Trade Union NUSS

Global Unions: PSI as coördinating Global Union

See: www.lgbtiworkers.org