

# LGBTQ2S+ voices in employment: Labour market experiences of sexual and gender minorities in Canada

Report submitted to Women and Gender Equality Canada



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

Researchers report that as a group, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, Two-Spirit, and other gender and sexual minority (LGBTQ2S+) people in Canada face significant inequities in the labour market, including with respect to average earnings, job satisfaction, and likelihood of being employed. While this is an emerging area of research, existing literature points to the absence of safe and inclusive work environments as well as experiences of discrimination as key systemic barriers to seeking, maintaining, and advancing in employment for this group. Despite these reports, significant knowledge gaps continue to limit our understanding of the socio-economic outcomes of the LGBTQ2S+ community. Qualitative research has particular value in providing insights into the experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in the labour market.

This study is part of the multi-phase project, *Building the evidence base about economic, health and social inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada*, which aims to address identified research gaps in this area. Funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada, the research was led by the Social Research Demonstration Corporation, in partnership with Dr. Sean Waite at the University of Western Ontario, Pride at Work Canada, and the Labour Market Information Council. This report shares findings from Phase 3 of the project, an in-depth qualitative research study of the labour market experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals across Canada. The findings presented here focus on the stories shared by the research participants themselves, including their personal employment journeys, the connections they made between those experiences, and their perceptions of underlying causes and implications.

### WHO WILL FIND IT USEFUL?

This report offers readers a nuanced and in-depth view of LGBTQ2S+ individuals' experiences in employment, key factors influencing employment inequities, and the contributors to positive workplace experiences, which have remained largely undocumented in research to date. As such, it may be useful to diverse audiences and stakeholders, including employers, service providers, researchers, policymakers, LGBTQ2S+ individuals themselves, and others such as advocates concerned with the labour market experiences and outcomes of equity-deserving populations.

For instance, employers and service providers working within employment may gain insights into how to recruit and better support LGBTQ2S+ employees, with potential implications for employee satisfaction, turnover, and productivity. Researchers may benefit from this study's



deeper engagement with the qualitative labour market experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada, including among bisexual and gender-diverse individuals, for whom research is especially lacking. For policymakers and government stakeholders, this report may serve as a resource in informing policy and program interventions that can meaningfully address the systemic inequities experienced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals in employment and other spheres. Similarly, advocates who seek to improve conditions for LGBTQ2S+ individuals in employment can draw on the evidence to guide and prioritize their activities.

We hope that LGBTQ2S+ readers who see themselves reflected in these findings will find value in these shared experiences, in addition to feeling equipped with greater knowledge to support them in their own employment journeys. Finally, this report may offer non-LGBTQ2S+ readers a better understanding of their LGBTQ2S+ peers' and colleagues' experiences, including how to establish and grow their allyship practice at work and elsewhere.

## HOW WAS THIS REPORT DEVELOPED?

This qualitative study draws on data gathered through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Self-identified LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada who were between the ages of 18-59 and currently or recently employed were recruited primarily through Pride at Work Canada's employer and community partner networks. Recognizing the rich diversity within the LGBTQ2S+ community, we actively sought participants representing a wide range of social locations, regions, occupations, labour market sectors, and industries. This report draws on the voices of 34 participants who participated in either interviews (n=12), focus groups (n=7), or both (n=15). In total, we spoke with 27 participants in interviews, and 22 in focus groups.

Interviews focused on individuals' positive and negative labour market experiences, career decision-making and trajectories, and facilitators or barriers to attaining and maintaining employment. Focus groups were leveraged as a space to expand on, validate, and co-interpret findings from interviews, as well as to explore potential solutions in a group setting. Data analysis used iterative thematic coding. Participants were offered the opportunity to review and edit their quotes and how they were described in this report. The core research team was composed of white, cisgender sexual minority researchers at intersections of other social locations and lived experiences. The study received approval from the Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

### Employment experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals

#### *Accessing and maintaining employment*

Prejudice and discrimination emerged as key themes in participants' experiences accessing and maintaining employment, particularly with respect to hiring, remuneration, and retention. Participants also shared experiences of discriminatory treatment by colleagues, managers, and clients, including harassment and refusal to work with LGBTQ2S+ employees. While these experiences were attributed to participants' gender and/or sexual identity, they were also attributed to other characteristics or social locations, such as race, age, or ability.

#### *Day-to-day experiences on the job*

Participants from diverse occupational and socio-demographic backgrounds recounted numerous and repeated microaggressions in day-to-day employment contexts, illustrating the pervasiveness of such experiences. While the types of microaggressions took varied forms, five overarching types of experiences emerged as especially prevalent: 1) cisheteronormative interactions and encounters; 2) prejudicial attitudes; 3) stigmatized and sexualized lifestyles and relationships; 4) the undermining and discounting of skills, experience, and authority; and 5) workplace social exclusion. These day-to-day experiences were often underpinned by the burden, stress, and associated risks of identity disclosure for LGBTQ2S+ employees.

#### *Navigating a career*

LGBTQ2S+ employees described the need to constantly navigate complex – and often inequitable – systems and structures within employment, which fundamentally shaped their careers. An overarching sense of precarity of work and income insecurity complicated the employment journeys of many LGBTQ2S+ individuals we spoke with. Furthermore, participants described extensive and detailed processes they used to negotiate safety and inclusion in career decision-making, requiring significant investment of skill, time, and resources. Cisheteronormative<sup>a</sup> systems, policies, and infrastructure also emerged as a key theme constraining LGBTQ2S+ individuals' employment and career choices.

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<sup>a</sup> Cisheteronormativity refers the deeply entrenched belief that gender is binary, that everyone's gender aligns with their sex assigned at birth, and that heterosexuality is the norm.

### *Cumulative experiences across social locations, life domains, and life course*

Participants' experiences in employment were shaped by their diverse social locations both in addition to, and in combination with, their gender and sexual identities. Similarly, the factors – and particularly disadvantages – they described as driving their experiences in the labour market were inextricably linked to experiences in other life domains, such as education, housing, or health care. Importantly, participant stories underscored the relationship between cumulative disadvantage over the life course and negative employment experiences at each stage along the way. Early life experiences of LGBTQ2S+ people were frequently characterized by bias and disadvantage, with long-standing economic impacts.

### *Key factors influencing employment inequities*

#### *Prejudice and discrimination*

Prejudice and discrimination emerged as drivers of employment inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals, negatively influencing hiring, remuneration, retention, and advancement. Participants routinely described discriminatory systems and practices on the part of organizations, employers, clients, and coworkers that negatively affected their employment trajectories. Yet most participants described it being very difficult to demonstrate that they had been discriminated against (e.g., in a dismissal or lost job opportunity) on the basis of gender or sexual identity. For those experiencing discrimination in a workplace, reporting these instances to management in some cases compounded their negative experiences.

#### *Heteronormativity and cisnormativity*

The vast majority of participants asserted that workplaces underpinned by heteronormativity and cisnormativity remained the status quo, such that LGBTQ2S+ people's lives and identities were seen as inappropriate for or incompatible with workplace expectations. Specifically, overwhelmingly cisheteronormative environments can lead employers to marginalize LGBTQ2S+ employees intentionally or unintentionally through the concept of "job fit." We heard that being "out" at work carried a high risk of being perceived and described as having "poor fit" within a position or an organization. In turn, "poor fit" had negative impacts in key areas of social and professional networks and training and advancement opportunities, sometimes resulting in LGBTQ2S+ individuals leaving their positions.



### *Constrained choices*

LGBTQ2S+ employees' sense of choice was constrained when it came to making and pursuing employment-related decisions. Educational barriers, economic precarity, and in particular, the absence of safe and inclusive job opportunities substantially limited their options as jobseekers or employees, resulting in wage inequities, job insecurity, and reduced job mobility. This meant participants had to make key trade-offs when seeking work or advancement, and in decisions to leave their jobs or work sectors. Importantly, other factors such as discrimination often contributed to the sense of constrained choices, pointing to the interconnected, multi-level, and systemic nature of the drivers of inequitable employment outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals.

### *Repeated exposure to discrimination, prejudice, and microaggressions*

The vast majority of LGBTQ2S+ participants described witnessing and experiencing prejudice, microaggressions, and discrimination in the labour market. Over time, observing, encountering, and navigating these situations had a cumulative effect, with negative implications for their mental health and well-being. In some instances, these experiences had tangible effects on workplace performance and confidence, with consequences for outcomes like pay and advancement. Guarding, concealing, and coding were identified as tactics to avoid and respond to ongoing negative treatment based on gender and sexual identity.

## Contributors to positive workplace experiences

### *Inclusive leadership, committed allies, and LGBTQ2S+ community at work*

Many participants described directors, supervisors, and managers who were explicitly and genuinely committed to LGBTQ2S+ equity as essential to fostering safer and more inclusive workplace environments – as well as improved outcomes – for LGBTQ2S+ employees. In fact, some described inclusive leadership as a protective factor against experiences of discrimination on the job. Several participants also spoke to the positive effects of working with non-LGBTQ2S+ allies and colleagues who were open-minded and affirming, as well as having a sense of LGBTQ2S+ community in the workplace.

### *LGBTQ2S+-specific practices, programs, or policies*

Participants discussed a wide range of practices, programs, or policies they perceived as supporting better employment experiences or outcomes. This range included workplace policies and benefits designed explicitly with LGBTQ2S+ employees in mind, initiatives designed to foster gender inclusion and respect for gender diversity, and workplace education and training.

In doing so, participants emphasized the importance of employer accountability in fostering better outcomes, and the need to shift responsibility for creating safe and inclusive environments away from LGBTQ2S+ employees themselves.

### *Progressive, flexible, and people-centred workplaces*

Participants advocated for workplaces to embrace an inclusive and progressive work culture that would enhance the experiences of all employees, with distinct benefits for those who are LGBTQ2S+. Prioritizing employee well-being emerged as a key theme, especially policies and practices aimed at supporting positive mental health and increasing flexibility. Adequate and equitable wages – including through the use of transparent pay scales – and comprehensive benefit packages were considered key to meeting the unique needs of LGBTQ2S+ employees.

### *Non-workplace factors*

Many participants described strong peer, family, and community support systems and networks in childhood and adulthood as having positive effects on individuals' employment experiences. Access to LGBTQ2S+ networks outside their workplace allowed participants to leverage connections with peers to obtain employment, and to gauge the safety of a job prior to applying. Legislative approaches were mentioned as necessary to ensure and enhance the rights and inclusion of LGBTQ2S+ employees, particularly the implementation and enforcement of policies around anti-discrimination, employment and pay equity, and stronger labour rights and standards.

## WHAT ARE THE REPORT'S CONCLUSIONS?

This report summarized findings from an in-depth qualitative study of the labour market experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals across Canada. Drawing on the voices of those participating in interviews and focus groups, this study sought to address a knowledge gap by focusing on the lived experiences of currently and recently employed LGBTQ2S+ individuals. We hope this report adds valuable insights to the quantitative research being conducted in this area – including our own – by shedding light on the stories behind the statistics.

Despite legislative and socio-cultural advances in LGBTQ2S+ inclusion in Canada in recent years, our findings suggest that LGBTQ2S+ individuals continue to face labour market and employment inequities that are systemic and mutually reinforcing with those in other spheres. The employment experiences of those with whom we spoke were commonly characterized by prejudice, discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion. In addition to implications for mental health and well-being, participants articulated specific examples where these experiences inhibited their capacity to access, maintain, and advance in employment. At the same time,

participants' accounts conveyed important differences across the LGBTQ2S+ community in Canada, pointing to the role of diverse social locations in shaping the experiences of gender and sexual minority individuals. Those whose experiences were additionally shaped by sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression described distinct and exacerbated disadvantage in employment.

Although our findings suggest that the employment journeys of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada continue to be characterized by prejudice and discrimination, participants' stories also displayed a great deal of resilience. Furthermore, several participants described jobs they found to be inclusive, positive, and affirming, and detailed some positive experiences that pointed to potential solutions. While these findings are offered as participant-proposed solutions rather than formal recommendations, we hope they mobilize readers to action, with a view to developing policy and program interventions that are evidence-informed, inclusive, equitable, and effective for this population.

**Content warning:**

This report contains reference to and describes experiences that may be upsetting or triggering to some readers. These include: homo/bi/transphobia, misgendering, forced outing, sexualization, sexism, racism, ableism, and instances of prejudice, discrimination, microaggressions, and violence faced by LGBTQ2S+ and otherwise marginalized individuals.



# INTRODUCTION

## CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE

Research shows that as a group, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, Two-Spirit, and other gender and sexuality minority (LGBTQ2S+)<sup>b</sup> people in Canada face significant inequities in the labour market. This includes greater barriers to and within employment, experiences of discrimination, higher rates of poverty, and significantly lower median annual earnings, despite often having higher levels of education than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts. This is in addition to poorer health (e.g., greater mental health challenges) and social outcomes (e.g., greater rates of social exclusion) experienced by this population, which may be further compounded by economic and employment inequities.<sup>1-6</sup> The implications of failing to meaningfully address these inequities may also extend beyond individuals, given international evidence associating higher levels of LGBTQ2S+ workplace inclusion with improved productivity and positive economic growth.<sup>13,14</sup>

While this is an emerging area of research, existing literature points to the importance of factors such as compensation, employment security, work environment, and health and safety in shaping inequitable economic outcomes observed for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. For example, the absence of safe and inclusive work environments and experiences of microaggressions, bullying, and discrimination pose systemic barriers to seeking, maintaining, and advancing in employment for this group.<sup>7-9</sup> *Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy* identifies LGBTQ2S+ people as being at greater risk of poverty, and aims to address barriers that prevent LGBTQ2S+ people from equal participation in the labour market as one means of alleviating income insecurity.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been felt equally: data show that sexual and gender minorities have faced an amplified risk of job loss and income

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<sup>b</sup> While this report uses LGBTQ2S+ to refer to gender and sexual minority individuals as a community, we acknowledge that terminology is constantly evolving and that others may prefer other acronyms (e.g., 2SLGBTQIA+, LGBT, LGBTTTQIAAP). The "+" in LGBTQ2S+ intends to convey the inclusion of gender and sexual minority individuals whose identities may not be explicitly represented in this acronym. Further, we recognize the challenges of using one term to convey a rich diversity of gender and sexual identities, and associated experiences and outcomes. Where feasible and appropriate, we refer to specific groups or sub-groups (e.g., trans people, bisexual people) throughout this report.

insecurity throughout the pandemic, with disproportionate impacts on employment, household finances, and physical and mental health.<sup>11-12</sup> This serves to exacerbate existing disparities, which are rooted in systemic stigma, prejudice, and discrimination.

Given this context, the Government of Canada has placed increased emphasis on addressing equity for LGBTQ2S+ people, including through the collection of data that better reflects the perspectives and needs of affected communities.<sup>10,13</sup> Yet significant knowledge and data gaps persist in this area and continue to limit our understanding of the social, health, and economic experiences and outcomes of the LGBTQ2S+ community. Although many of these gaps are quantitative in nature, the value of qualitative research that offers a more nuanced understanding of the day-to-day experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in employment that cannot be captured in survey data has also been noted.<sup>7,14</sup> While some studies have sought to qualitatively understand the experiences of LGBTQ2S+ employees in specific occupations, such as academia or policing,<sup>15,16</sup> the need for comprehensive research in this area is documented. Qualitative research has particular value in providing insights into the lived experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in the labour market given its scarcity in Canada.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, there is an urgent need for research to identify key determinants and mechanisms of economic outcomes for gender and sexual minorities, as well as to position these outcomes within a broader framework that also considers social and health inequities. There is also value in and a need to develop a more nuanced understanding of the diverse employment experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada, with a view to informing policy and program interventions that are inclusive, equitable, and effective for this population. This report intends to contribute to this aim.

## THIS REPORT

This report shares findings from the third and final phase of research from the project *Building the evidence base about economic, health, and social inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada*, led by the Social Research Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), in partnership with Dr. Sean Waite at the University of Western Ontario, Pride at Work Canada (PAWC), and the Labour Market Information Council (LMIC). Funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE), the project aims to address key knowledge and data gaps with respect to economic, health, and social outcomes of LGBTQ2S+ people in Canada.

Building upon and informed by two prior phases of research, this phase of the project was designed as a qualitative study of LGBTQ2S+ employment experiences across Canada. Key findings from these prior phases are summarized below, in addition to the research questions that guided the work.

This third phase of the project sought to address the following overarching research question: *What are the experiences of employment and career pathways for LGBTQ2S+-identified individuals who are currently or recently employed?* Drawing on interviews and focus groups, this work engaged with the following sub-questions:

1. What barriers and challenges do LGBTQ2S+ individuals face in achieving employment and career-related goals?
2. What facilitators (e.g., networks, programs, etc.) support LGBTQ2S+ individuals in achieving employment and career-related goals?
3. How are labour market outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals tied to other life domains (e.g., mental health, social relationships, etc.)?

This report serves as the final deliverable for this phase of research. Following this introduction and an overview of the first two phases of the project, the next section provides an overview of methodology. Subsequently, the report outlines findings organized by three main themes: 1) employment experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada, 2) key factors influencing employment inequities, which we label “drivers”, and 3) contributors to positive workplace experiences. A conclusion follows, along with next steps based on the findings to date. The appendix includes a detailed methodology for the study. Note that fulsome lexicons of self-described identities contained in this report can be found in other published resources.<sup>17</sup>

Several stylistic choices have been made regarding this report’s readability and presentation. Experiences and sub-themes with commonalities have been gathered together, with illustrative quotes from interviews and focus groups used to highlight a particular topic. In some cases, we include longer stories participants shared, edited for brevity and readability. These often intercut across themes and are presented as case vignettes in boxes with a light red background. Particularly relevant contextual information (e.g., expanding on key concepts) has been highlighted visually in boxes with a light blue background. Definitions of key terms are offered in text and bolded in red. Finally, identity descriptors are terms that participants used to describe themselves. These were developed based on how participants self-identified, along with other characteristics they felt shaped their experiences. As a result, the identities highlighted in descriptors vary across participants and may not be fully representative of all the ways people who identify as LGBTQ2S+ describe themselves.



## Summary of findings from previous phases of research

### PHASE 1: Literature search, key informant interviews, data scan<sup>13</sup>

#### Research questions addressed:

- What are the key determinants of economic and labour market outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada?
- What nationally, provincially, and/or territorially representative datasets exist that allow exploration of the relationship between LGBTQ2S+ identity and labour market outcomes?

#### Key findings:

- Poorer economic outcomes are observed for gender and sexual minorities in Canada, and particularly for transgender individuals and those whose experiences are further shaped by race, ability, and other characteristics.<sup>5,18–21</sup>
- LGBTQ2S+ individuals have distinct labour market outcomes, including access and attainment, formality and precarity, type, sector, and location.<sup>22–26</sup> Within employment, LGBTQ2S+ individuals experience challenges related to discrimination, concealment, and social or workplace exclusion.<sup>27–29</sup>
- Available data point to additional differential outcomes, particularly mental health, which may be mutually reinforcing with economic and labour market outcomes.<sup>4,30–32</sup>
- Explanations for differential outcomes are varied, and included discrimination across sectors, experiences of prejudice and violence grounded in homo/trans/biphobia, family relationships, concealment of gender and sexual identity, and the accumulation of disadvantage over time.
- While there is movement towards increased inclusivity in survey measures related to gender and sexual minority identities in Canada, limitations remain. A lack of data on LGBTQ2S+-specific experiences, including research bridging economic, health and social outcomes, serves as a key barrier to designing solutions and interventions.

### PHASE 2: Quantitative study linking the Canadian Community Health Survey and T1 Family Files<sup>6</sup>

#### Research question addressed:

- What is the association between determinants identified in previous phases and economic outcomes such as labour force status, earnings, household income, and total income for LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada?

#### Key findings:

- Sexual minorities earn less compared with heterosexual men per annum. In descriptive analyses, heterosexual men were found to earn the most (\$55,959), followed by gay men (\$50,822), lesbian women (\$44,740), bisexual men (\$31,776), and bisexual women (\$25,290).
- Sexual minorities experience inequities in health and socioeconomic outcomes, with bisexual men and women consistently reporting poorest outcomes. These include increased stress, food insecurity, lower rates of life and job satisfaction, community belonging, and lower likelihood of being employed and in full-time employment.
- Drivers of earnings disparities are diverse and interconnected with mental health, but some of the gap remains unexplained. Industry (specifically, the underrepresentation of sexual minorities in high-paying occupations), mental health, and labour supply were key drivers of earnings differences, with demographics also playing a role.
- Substantial data gaps limit our understanding of the experiences of the full LGBTQ2S+ community. Importantly, the study could not measure the experiences of gender minority individuals using currently available data.



## HOW THIS REPORT WAS DEVELOPED

This report draws on qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Participants were recruited primarily through Pride at Work Canada’s employer and community partner networks. Individuals were required to meet the following criteria to be eligible to participate: a) self-identify as LGBTQ2S+, b) currently or recently (i.e., in the past two years) employed, c) reside in Canada, d) speak English, and e) be between the ages of 18-59.<sup>c</sup> Those eligible were invited to take part in a one-hour interview and/or a one and a half-hour focus group discussion over Zoom. All participants provided informed consent in writing prior to their participation, which was confirmed verbally during data collection. With participants’ consent, interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded. Participants were offered a \$50 gift card as a thank you for their participation in each data collection activity.

The previous quantitative phase of this project informed a number of design decisions with respect to the qualitative data collection that occurred in this phase (for a fulsome description of the study’s methodology, Appendix A). The research team oversampled bisexual and gender minority individuals, with a view to providing a more nuanced understanding of the particularly poor outcomes for the former and to compensate for the lack of data for the latter. This report draws on the voices of 34 participants who took part in either interviews (n=12), focus groups (n=7), or both (n=15). In total, we spoke with 27 participants in interviews, and 22 in focus groups.

Data collection protocols were informed by findings from the previous phases of research. Interviews focused on personal experiences in the labour market – both positive and negative – decision-making (e.g., choices related to industry and occupation), facilitators or barriers to attaining and maintaining a job, career trajectories, perceived causes and consequences of inequities, and connections between health, social, and employment experiences and outcomes. Focus groups – while also exploring these subjects – offered an opportunity for researchers to share and validate themes that had emerged in interviews, as well as to explore solutions and recommendations for achieving positive labour market outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ people in Canada.

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<sup>c</sup> One exception was made for a participant who was 60 years of age and met all other inclusion criteria.

Detailed interview and focus group notes were coded and annotated by at least two members of the research team, followed by a structured collaborative process to identify themes and subthemes, including illustrative participant case vignettes that exemplified certain concepts.<sup>33</sup> Participants were offered the opportunity to review and edit their quotes and identity descriptors prior to their inclusion in this report.

The study received approval from the Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB). For a fulsome description of the study's methods, including strengths and limitations of the research, please refer to Appendix A.

## Participants

Recognizing the rich diversity within the LGBTQ2S+ community, we actively sought and prioritized participants from a wide range of social locations (e.g., gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age), geographic locations, and occupations, sectors, and industries. While not intended to be a representative sample, the 34 unique participants include:

- 13 gender diverse individuals, including those identifying as trans binary (i.e., men or women), agender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, and non-binary.
- A range of sexual orientations, including those identifying as queer (n=12), gay (n=11), bisexual (n=8), pansexual (n<5), lesbian (n<5), and heterosexual (n<5), as well as androsexual, asexual, and biromantic (n<5). Several participants used multiple terms to describe themselves.
- 13 individuals from racialized communities, including those who self-identified as a person of colour (n=7), Black or of African or Caribbean descent (n=5), or Indigenous (n=1).
- 11 individuals who disclosed experiences with disability or neurodivergence, including chronic illness, mood disorders (e.g., anxiety/depression), and ADHD.
- Representation from 6 provinces across Canada – including Alberta, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec – with over half in Ontario.
- Various ages, ranging from 22 to 60 years old (of those who disclosed their specific age).
- Representation from a diverse range of sectors and industries, including hospitality, law, education, non-profit, banking/finance, IT, social services, academia, entertainment, public service, STEM, and the skilled trades.
- A wide range of other identities and backgrounds that shaped individual experiences and outcomes, including linguistic diversity, newcomer/immigrant status, experiences of poverty/homelessness, parental status, and body/size diversity.



## EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ2S+ INDIVIDUALS

We begin this report by summarizing the key themes of employment experiences, as shared in participants' stories of their labour market journeys. Participants spoke about day-to-day experiences in the workplace (e.g., interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and clients) and those involving larger actors or institutions within the employment ecosystem (e.g., organizational policies, insurance providers, unions or professional associations). They also drew connections between individual experiences and their broader career trajectories, as well as how employment experiences shaped and were shaped by other aspects of their lives, including health, well-being, and social relationships.

This section focuses predominantly on employment experiences that were characterized as inequitable, harmful, or otherwise negative in nature. By *inequities*, we refer to experiences that are the result of individuals' social location and relative disadvantage, represent consistently observable patterns of difference, are unjust in nature, and can plausibly be ameliorated or avoided by collective action.<sup>9,34</sup> These findings provide an accurate representation of the types of experiences participants most commonly shared in interviews and focus groups. That said, positive workplace experiences and what contributes to them were also described, and are explored in the final section of this report.

This section proceeds by describing employment experiences across three main themes: 1) accessing and maintaining employment, 2) day-to-day experiences on the job, and 3) navigating a career. It also discusses cumulative experiences across social locations, life domains, and the life course.

### ACCESSING AND MAINTAINING EMPLOYMENT

In interviews and focus groups, participants described experiences in the various stages of accessing and maintaining employment. Prejudice and discrimination emerged as key themes running through these experiences. By *prejudice*, we mean negative experiences arising from biased or hostile *attitudes* held about LGBTQ2S+ people. By *discrimination*, we mean unjust

actions committed against LGBTQ2S+ people on the basis of identity (often informed by prejudicial attitudes).

Notably, while participants attributed these experiences of discrimination to their gender and/or sexual identity, they often spoke about these experiences as occurring in concert with their other characteristics or social locations, such as race, age, or ability. This section describes participants' employment experiences accessing and maintaining employment in the following contexts: hiring; remuneration; advancement, retention and dismissal; stereotyping in employment; and discriminatory treatment. These are discussed in sequence below.

## Hiring

While most participants in our study were employed at the time of data collection, several reflected on their pre-employment experiences, at the application and hiring stage. Specifically, LGBTQ2S+ individuals in our study recounted struggling to obtain employment, despite a widespread perception that their education, skills, and experience were well-suited to the positions they were seeking. Several participants attributed these challenges to homo/bi/transphobic discrimination, with many suspecting that the presentation and/or perception of their identity prevented them being hired. One participant described the process of prospective employers becoming more aware of their gender expression when moving from the application to interview stage, and being at greater risk of discrimination as a result<sup>d</sup>:

*[When I apply], interviewers don't see what I look like ... Earlier this year, I interviewed for a really promising job. Everything mostly went well. I didn't end up getting the job. I couldn't help but wonder whether or not my gender presentation and sexuality had a part in that, in me not getting the job. Even though during the interview everything seemed to be going well, I just can't shake that feeling.*

*- Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian*

Discrimination at the hiring stage was considered especially prominent among those whom employers were more likely to perceive as a member of a gender minority. This was echoed by both transgender and cisgender participants, who regularly pointed to the role of transphobia in constraining gender minorities' access to employment: *"For gender minorities or people who are visibly trans or non-binary, I think the very overt prejudice against them prevents them from even getting a step in the door"* (queer, cis woman).

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<sup>d</sup> Note that all participants had the opportunity to review and edit their quotes and identity descriptors prior to their inclusion in this report.

The perception of LGBTQ2S+ people as “costly” or “problematic” by employers was also mentioned by several participants, viewed as particularly impactful for gender minority individuals. Some suggested that employers may avoid hiring a candidate for client-facing jobs if they suspect customers will have prejudicial attitudes about them, with a view to avoiding financial repercussions: *“To take on a trans person, in the eyes of the company, is a liability. It’s a higher-risk liability than hiring a cis person”* (transgender woman).

Others described being made to feel like a burden within workplaces, and posited that some employers might avoid hiring LGBTQ2S+ candidates out of a belief that they may be more likely to highlight gaps in workplace supports or require accommodations that employers were unable or unwilling to provide. One participant who worked in employment law elaborated on this, reflecting on her experience with working with employers: *“They’ll immediately start thinking of what they’ll need in terms of accommodation, how difficult it will be [to hire gender minority employees], and how it would just be easier to hire a [cisgender] man or a woman, and not [have to] think about that”* (queer, cis woman).

Participants often expressed that they felt it was “easier” for employers to hire individuals they perceived as cisgender and heterosexual, rather than those they knew or perceived to be sexual or gender minorities.

## Remuneration

Several participants described being paid less than their cisgender, heterosexual peers, and shared specific examples of this occurring: for instance, discovering that their salary was lower than others in the same position and with comparable experience, or being the only employee to receive a pay cut that was attributed to cutbacks as a result of COVID-19. These remuneration differences were characterized as both inequitable and discriminatory in nature. While acknowledging the inherent challenges in knowing for certain whether pay disparities were fueled by discrimination, individuals often struggled to identify other explanations. This was especially true for those who were **out** at work – a term describing individual’s self-disclosure as LGBTQ2S+ in a given domain (e.g., home, work) or among certain individuals, short for “coming out” – and whose sexual and/or gender minority identity could be more perceptible as a result.



### Case vignette 1: Wage disparities among LGBTQ2S+ employees

One participant, a bisexual white woman who grew up in poverty, described feeling she was underpaid by approximately \$15,000 in her position given her performance, experience, and salaries at competitor organizations. This was the first employment experience in which she had been out during the interview process. She was out at work and, to her knowledge, was the only LGBTQ2S+ employee at the company.

The starting salary for the position was lower than she had anticipated, and initial negotiations to this end proved unsuccessful. Despite this, the woman decided to accept the offer due to her passion for the field. However, soon after starting in the role, she realized she was acting at a level above the one she was being compensated for. In response to this, she requested a meeting with her supervisor to discuss pay, where she presented a report outlining her responsibilities and performance as they related to job descriptions both at her current and acting level. While this discussion resulted in a raise, she was not granted a promotion. In the time since this meeting, she has continued to face situations in which she was asked to perform tasks outside of her position or pay grade.

Following her raise, the woman's annual salary was \$54,000. In conversations with colleagues, she learned that another individual – a racialized person, in a predominantly-white workplace – shared similar concerns. While this person was currently earning \$68,000 following a promotion, their starting salary had been considerably lower than the woman's. Another coworker, who was also transparent with our participant about his salary, shared that he was hired at an initial salary of \$72,000.

In discussing her experience, the woman hesitated to explicitly name discrimination because this felt at odds with otherwise positive experiences in her current role: *“no one has ever made me feel uncomfortable about my queerness.”* That said, she struggled to identify any other cause of the apparent inequity, saying that *“it just makes you question it, because no one else is struggling with pay.”*

In several cases, individuals described their experiences in remuneration in the context of diverse identities and social locations. As a result, they found it challenging to discern whether pay disparities were driven by their gender, sexuality, or another identity. For example, many examples of pay disparities arose among participants who also identified – or may be read by employers – as women. In these instances, the gender wage gap further confounded participants' efforts to identify the source of this disparity. As the same woman in the above case vignette later explained, *“I encountered pay discrimination, and it's one of those things where it's like, ‘is it my gender? Is it my queerness?’ I don't know.”* As she later reflected, *“It's a constant question I still ask in everything I do. How much is my queerness going to shape the validity of the work I present to you, and the validity of what you offer me, and how you fulfill me for me fulfilling your needs?”* Other participants also alluded to their skills and labour being assigned a lower value as a result of their gender or sexual identity.

Anticipated discrimination also emerged as a theme, whereby participants were hesitant to negotiate wages due to concerns about how a current or prospective employer might react. There was a sense that employers expected new hires, especially those who are LGBTQ2S+, to be grateful to be offered a job at all – particularly in the context of COVID-19 – and that this may also serve to constrain LGBTQ2S+ individuals’ expectations when seeking employment. One participant observed that *“trans people are reluctant to negotiate because they are worried the offer will be rescinded, whereas a white man is seen as being in charge, because none of that is attached to his identity. A trans person will have one offer”* (white genderqueer teacher). In doing so, they shed light on the combined and compounding challenges of anticipated discrimination, job scarcity, and the absence of gender and race-based privilege among LGBTQ2S+ individuals, particularly gender minorities.

Along similar lines, another participant alluded to the role of internalized homo-, bi-, and transphobia among LGBTQ2S+ individuals: *“They’re just trying to grasp onto whatever they can grasp to get work ... Employers see that as an opportunity to get the same job done without having to pay the same amount”* (transgender woman). In other words, given the lack of safe and viable employment options – as well as the toll that ongoing experiences of discrimination may reasonably take on one’s sense of self-worth – employers and LGBTQ2S+ jobseekers may be more likely to offer and accept lower wages, respectively.

## Stereotyping in employment

Participants reported being routinely exposed to and affected by a range of employment-related stereotypes. These stereotypes appeared to be felt most acutely among those in public- or client-facing positions, as well as those who were out in the workplace and thus were more vulnerable to identity-based stereotypes.

Participants’ experiences of stereotyping were often linked to norms and assumptions about gender roles as well as how these interact with LGBTQ2S+ identity. For instance, a gay man working as a pilot described being confronted with comments that he was better suited to a flight attendant role, underscoring the ways in which stereotypes about sexual minority men are fueled by both misogyny and expectations of femininity. In other cases, similar stereotypes affected the actual work tasks LGBTQ2S+ employees were asked to perform.

Anticipating this stereotyping, one participant made a conscious decision to not disclose her sexual orientation in her job as a cashier at a fast-food restaurant: *“I couldn't be like, ‘oh, me and my girlfriend,’ because then suddenly it's like, ‘oh, you can't work on the floor with the other girls, you have to be in the kitchen with the guys”* (pansexual woman of Jamaican descent). This quote speaks to the confounding role of sexual orientation in gender-segregated workplaces,

where a pansexual woman's sexual identity is viewed at odds with her gender and the associated job responsibilities.

Stereotyping also occurred in relation to the perceived appropriateness of LGBTQ2S+ people working in certain industries and occupations, often affecting career choices and trajectories. Recalling a previous discussion of hypersexualization among LGBTQ2S+ employees, some participants pointed to the stereotype of sexual and gender minorities as deviant or predatory, and therefore unsuitable for jobs involving children and youth. This stereotypical and deeply prejudiced view – whether explicitly stated or anticipated by affected individuals – was especially impactful for those identifying or perceived as men or masculine:

*The perceptions around queer males being predatory impact me on a daily basis. I am so hypersensitive as to how I am being perceived by others. [My] mental health is really bad. I have my own ways of coping through it, and I went to therapy for it ... How many exhausting situations are running through my head that aren't running through other people's heads while I'm working?*

*- White genderqueer teacher*

Another participant, a transgender man working in youth services, shared a particularly damaging experience of being outed in his workplace as a result of concerns brought up about the appropriateness of his employment there. As he described:

*I was outed by somebody else. That came in the form of meetings behind my back by supervisors, about the repercussions of people finding out that I was trans, especially in relation to parents – I work with youth – and how that would create a backlash.*

*- Transgender man working in youth services*

In fact, stereotypes fueled by ignorance, bias, and prejudice represented some of the negative and derogatory messages received by LGBTQ2S+ participants on a regular basis.

## Advancement, retention, and dismissal

Some LGBTQ2S+ participants described other employees with similar or lesser qualifications, experience, and performance being promoted while they were left behind. This was frequently attributed to prejudice and discrimination. While some were denied advancement upon putting themselves forward for promotion, many pointed to prejudice and discrimination as shaping and restricting their access to opportunities that often lend themselves to advancement. For instance, one participant had observed a trend in how assignments were divided between him and his coworkers, leading him to question why he was more frequently tasked with work he perceived to be less desirable: *"I'm always put, I would say, at the bottom when it comes to landing good*

*jobs. I can't help but feel it's because I'm bisexual, because I don't think I'm bad enough to be at the back at the queue. I'm good at my job"* (bisexual Black architect).

Other practices that conveyed to participants that their careers within a given company or industry were inevitably limited included greater barriers to accessing training and professional development opportunities, as well as workplace social exclusion; both of these are discussed later in this report. While not always explicitly tied to promotion, many felt strongly that these patterns of treatment were a) fueled by prejudice and discrimination and b) directly contributing to barriers to advancement or promotion in their roles.

In other cases, chances of promotion and advancement were viewed as inextricably linked to their level of “outness” in the workplace. One bisexual woman perceived her openly-LGBTQ2S+ identity as being in distinct contrast to a former workplace’s norms and culture. In speaking about this, she drew connections to her (lack of) advancement opportunities:

*I realized very quickly that I would never get promoted because I was the ‘shit disturber,’ and people told me all the time to cool it, tone it down ... All these people who started at the same time as me, and had similar or less education than me, kept getting promoted. Just looking at them, I knew I would never fit the bill.*

*- Bisexual woman living in a small town*

In a few instances, participants pointed to identity-based discrimination as causing them to lose their job, despite this rarely being named as the reason by employers. One transgender woman, a certified master electrician who was dismissed from her job and who suspected discrimination, remarked:

*It was widely known in the company I was working for that I was trans, and I found that out after I was dismissed. They indicated it was a just a position shift within the company; however, I do believe that was a dismissal for just kind of rocking the boat a little bit.*

*- Transgender woman*

Notably, participants tended to use more indirect language when discussing perceived instances of discrimination, especially in areas such as remuneration and dismissal. While the above participant suspected discrimination informed her employer’s decision to let her go, some used terms along similar lines as “rocking the boat” in describing employers’ rationale in the absence of overt identity-based discrimination.

Interestingly, some participants who were denied jobs or opportunities also simultaneously expressed feeling relief from the burden associated with that employer or workplace. Continuing to reflect on her experience, the same transgender employee as above noted that her employer

*“made it clear that they didn't want me working for them. And I don't want to be working for a company like that anyways”* (transgender woman).

## Discriminatory treatment by colleagues, managers, and clients

Participants shared numerous experiences of discriminatory treatment by colleagues, managers, and clients. These instances often related to disclosure, or participants being out (or outed) to those engaging in this treatment.

Among the most commonly recounted experiences were those where coworkers or clients refused to work with a person because of their gender or sexual identity. In one example, a participant detailed a former job in which a coworker explicitly refused to work with him because he was gay, with this refusal ultimately approved by the company's union. Another participant, who was employed as a social worker, described working with a court-mandated client who was aware of her identity, which she attributed to living in a small town. In initial sessions, the client expressed that he did not believe in or respect LGBTQ2S+ people, and would not work with anyone who identified as such. As a result of this, the participant was forced to stop working with this client.

Experiences of harassment directed at individuals on the basis of their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation were also raised by participants. Here, we distinguish **harassment** as acts, comments or displays that “demean, belittle, or cause personal humiliation or embarrassment, and any act of intimidation or threat.”<sup>35</sup> This includes incidents in which slurs were used directly against participants in employment contexts. It also includes acts of **deadnaming** – the use of a trans/non-binary birth name, rather than the person's chosen name – as well as purposeful **misgendering** – the identification of someone via a pronoun (e.g., she/her), form of address (e.g., Mr.), or other gendered label that does not align with their lived gender or with their preferred gender affirming pronoun.

One participant, while working at his part-time retail job, *“had somebody come in being like, ‘fuck, the [homophobic slur] is working’”* (gay man working multiple jobs). Similar experiences were reported by others. Furthermore, participants shared experiences of being misgendered and deadnamed over a sustained period of time, despite having attempted to raise or address this on an ongoing basis. For example, one individual who worked in the non-profit sector shared that they were *“misgendered for a year, and my boss was hiring staff to work on my team and introducing me with my name and the wrong pronouns ... Some coworkers never got it right, even after a year and a half”* (white genderqueer and transmasculine participant).

These incidents seemed particularly egregious in the context of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the increased use of technology facilitated the convenient sharing of names and pronouns through video conference display names and email signatures. As

one participant explained, "if my pronouns are in my Zoom name, then my coworkers shouldn't act like they can't read" (Black, agender, queer individual).

In some instances, participants reported making decisions in anticipation of discriminatory treatment that would result in a loss of clients and income. One woman described a decision to close her successful business when she transitioned, anticipating revenue loss from clients whom she expected would choose to no longer work with her:

*When I first came out, I wanted to close down my business ... Being an electrical contractor is stressful on its own, let alone coming out as being trans and trying to explain that to my clients ... I knew they wouldn't take too kindly to that. That was more of a business decision that I made ... I was looking at it in terms of dollars and cents.*

*- Transgender woman*

As with the above participant, the effects of actual or anticipated discriminatory treatment from colleagues, managers, and clients was deeply and negatively felt by many people in our study. LGBTQ2S+ employees described going to great lengths to avoid discriminatory people and treatment in the workplace, including changing (or having supervisors change) their schedules, job tasks, and client or customer base.

We also heard several instances where individuals directly attributed decisions to leave a job to ongoing experiences of harassment and discrimination:

*I had to leave the firm, because I feel like I wasn't treated right, at least not on the same standard as the rest ... I tried to raise [the treatment with the employer] a few times. They wouldn't even give me the attention ... I tried to go to the president, I was always met with excuses from his secretary ... It wasn't in my application that I was bi, so I think everyone found out later, after I started working. I think they just, they weren't telling me directly they were treating me this way because I was bi ... This was not a place for me, so I had to leave.*

*- Bisexual Black architect*

The participant quoted above perceived a direct link between coworkers' awareness of his bisexuality and a sense of "not being treated right" compared to others at his workplace, a situation which ultimately made the job untenable for him. It is worth emphasizing that the decision to leave jobs on the basis of discriminatory treatment is not one that is taken lightly: participants described seriously grappling with the mental health, income, and career trajectory-related implications or choosing to remain in or leave a job characterized by these experiences.



## Reporting prejudice and discrimination

Participants were often uncertain as to whether their experiences constituted prejudice and discrimination. In speaking to this, one participant noted that “*there is a very sound and specific definition of harassment and discrimination and the bar’s pretty high... [With] the systems in place, you don’t feel like it’s a really an option*” (white gay man in the public service). This quote underscores an unwillingness on the part of LGBTQ2S+ employees to come forward out of anticipation that their concerns will not be taken seriously.

Some participants described experiences that validated this concern, whereby reporting instances of prejudice and discrimination to management only worsened the situation. Issues brought forward by LGBTQ2S+ employees were either ignored, or solutions proposed by managers failed to address the underlying issue at hand (e.g., altering work schedules so that an LGBTQ2S+ employee was not working with someone accused of prejudice or discrimination). We heard that complaints made by LGBTQ2S+ employees about prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes or behaviours resulted in no meaningful action or change. As a result, participants faced difficult choices of either enduring toxic or unsafe work environments or being forced to leave their jobs altogether.

In a few cases, participants described being exposed to additional prejudice or discrimination after reporting concerns to management. This was the case for one Two-Spirit, lesbian social worker whose experiences were simultaneously shaped by homophobia, racism, and colonialism. Her experiences are highlighted in case vignette 2, below.

### Case vignette 2: The repercussions of reporting

This participant’s workplace was observing a moment of silence in honour of the children lost to Canada’s legacy of residential schools, which was a personally meaningful moment for her. One colleague openly remarked that they did not want to acknowledge the moment of silence. Our participant spoke up in response: she said she felt there was an undercurrent of racism and homophobia in the workplace, referring to this situation, but also to previous slurs (including by the colleague in question), and other remarks made in conversations on the job. Later that day, she was brought into a meeting to discuss a complaint that had been made against her. Management said she had “*crossed a line when [she] mentioned racism and homophobia,*” and requested she write an apology letter to the colleague. When she refused, she was called into another meeting: “*I was told that my saying there was racism and homophobia was inappropriate, and it was insulting towards the organization, and that I would have it written up in my file.*” The incident was dropped only after she informed management that she was considering bringing the case to a human rights tribunal. No further action – including an apology from the colleague or management – was ever taken.

## DAY-TO-DAY EXPERIENCES ON THE JOB

Participants discussed the challenges of day-to-day working as a LGBTQ2S+ person. Among these challenges, microaggressions emerged as a major theme across all interviews and focus groups. Participants from diverse occupational and socio-demographic backgrounds faced numerous and repeated microaggressions in day-to-day employment contexts, illustrating the pervasiveness of such experiences. While the types of microaggressions recounted took varied forms, five overarching types of experiences emerged as especially prevalent:

1) cisheteronormative interactions and encounters; 2) prejudicial attitudes; 3) stigmatized and sexualized lifestyles and relationships; 4) the undermining and discounting of skills, experience, and authority; and 5) workplace social exclusion. These are described in the subsections below.

### Microaggressions as “mosquito bites”

Microaggressions are “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.”<sup>36,37</sup> Coined by Chester Pierce and initially conceptualized with regards to race, Derald Wing Sue is largely credited for popularizing the term, as well as expanding its use to other equity-deserving groups. Despite a potentially-misleading prefix, researchers and advocates alike have emphasized the importance of not underestimating the impact of microaggressions, pointing to their greater frequency, subtlety, acceptability, and harm – especially when considered cumulatively – than more overt aggressions.<sup>38</sup> Evidence has linked microaggressions to experiences of anxiety, stress, and trauma among those affected, including members of the LGBTQ2S+ community.<sup>39</sup>

One participant explained his experiences with microaggressions and their consequences in employment:

*Every microaggression is like a mosquito bite, and eventually you get really itchy, and you get an infection, you have to take antibiotics, you have to take a few days off. I think that's exactly what happens for a lot of queer folks and racialized people: you end up dealing with the impacts of the infection of all the mosquito bites, all the microaggressions, so you have to take a few months off. You're not applying for jobs when you're dealing with the mental health stress of all of that. You're not networking with people that look like the people that bully you at work. You need to take some time to yourself to recover to heal, and then you get back at it. When you do that, that impacts your career. You're not seen as reliable. You're not seen as someone that can just do the job. You're seen as high-strung; you're seen as emotional. All of this stuff adds up, impacting peoples' wages and their ability to move up.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

## Cisheteronormative interactions and encounters

**Cisheteronormativity** refers to the deeply entrenched belief that gender is binary, that everyone's gender aligns with their sex assigned at birth, and that heterosexuality is the norm. While the concept of cisheteronormativity emerged in multiple contexts in this study, we focus here on the ways in which it shaped participants' workplace interactions.

Participants told us that cisheteronormativity frequently manifested in the form of unnecessarily gendered language and binary assumptions, for instance, through coworkers assuming someone's pronouns based on their gender expression alone. Another prominent example was how others would describe participants' partners in informal conversations, using gendered language that a) was premised on the gender binary and b) where it was assumed the partner's gender was different from that of the participant.

The harm of cisheteronormative language goes beyond its inaccuracy. These instances often led to participants feeling discomfort or uncertainty about the sincerity of a workplace's commitment to inclusion. For LGBTQ2S+ individuals, experiencing these defaults meant having to evaluate frequently whether or not they should correct people. They often had to weigh being honest and authentic with the risks associated with disclosure:

*I think that it's frustrating to have straightness be the status quo. So, I try not to come out *per se*, but I'll mention my ex-girlfriend, to see how they see that. But for some people, I'll say, 'my girlfriend at the time,' and they'll just think 'my friend who is a woman.' So, then, there is that internal battle of, 'do I correct them?' Do I make a point of making myself different from everybody around me, or do I just let it slide?*

*- White queer cis woman*

Cisheteronormativity is also manifested in assumptions about what typical life goals or stages look like. For example, LGBTQ2S+ individuals may delay, have limited access to, or choose not to pursue marriage, home ownership, and parenthood. As one participant explained: *"I don't want to say that my life path is not traditional, but I just want to say that maybe, by the age of 30, I'm not married and I don't have kids"* (queer, Muslim, South Asian man).

Critically, cisheteronormativity frequently drives the actual or perceived need to disclose one's gender or sexual minority identity, because LGBTQ2S+ peoples' identities fall outside of taken-for-granted "norms." They are more regularly confronted with the burden, stress, and risks of disclosure. Among our participants, decisions about disclosure emerged in day-to-day workplace interactions, for instance during "water cooler" conversations about weekend plans or when a colleague observed a family photo on their desk. While these types of interactions are commonplace in most workplace environments, they represent key moments where LGBTQ2S+ people are forced to choose between concealing or disclosing their identity, while considering the

potential consequences thereof. One participant characterized these experiences as “a bit of a triage process ... because there are some people [with whom] I just won’t address it because I’m not sure of how they’ll react” (white queer cis woman).

Overwhelmingly, participants framed cisheteronormative norms and expectations as both distressing and exhausting. Situations such as those described in this section meant that participants were often faced with the choice of repeatedly explaining and defending their identity or engaging in self-monitoring and concealment. The result of these interactions and encounters is a sense of intrinsic misalignment between LGBTQ2S+ employees and the majority of workplaces. As a source of microaggressions, cisheteronormativity served as a constant reminder to those in our study that their LGBTQ2S+ identities rendered them fundamentally outside the norm, and incompatible with their workplace as a result.

## Defining key terms

- **Cisheteronormativity** is a societal bias – often unconscious – that assumes cisgender and heterosexual as the norm or default. Cisnormativity ignores or underrepresents both gender and sex-based diversity (e.g., only including binary sex/gender options on a form for employees, as well as assuming alignment between the two). Heteronormativity ignores or underrepresents diversity in sexual identity, attraction, and behaviour (e.g., workplace benefits premised on heterosexual partnerships).<sup>40</sup> As a result of ignoring or underrepresenting LGBTQ2S+ identities and realities, cisheteronormativity also contributes to the relative privilege associated with being cisgender and/or heterosexual.
- **Disclosure** describes the act of revealing of one’s gender and/or sexual minority identity to another person. For some, disclosure as a term may be preferred to “coming out” as it implies less onus or burden for the LGBTQ2S+ individual; disclosure may also refer to more subtle actions or signals that convey LGBTQ2S+ identity. Rather than a one-time event, disclosure is something that LGBTQ2S+ employees navigate on an ongoing basis, in day-to-day interactions and with different coworkers and customers. Further, disclosure is a direct result of cisheteronormativity and the classification of certain gender and sexual identities as atypical (and thus requiring explicit acknowledgement).
- **Passing** can have several meanings in an LGBTQ2S+ context, though it typically refers to “being perceived by people and mainstream society as cisgender and/or heterosexual.”<sup>41</sup> The term is used to describe transgender individuals being perceived as their lived gender, or “passing” as cisgender. It can also refer to sexual minority individuals being perceived as heterosexual; for instance, a bisexual person in a relationship with someone of a different or “opposite” gender may be termed “straight-passing.”<sup>42</sup> Because of the relative privilege associated with being cisgender and/or heterosexual, passing may result in certain benefits (e.g., an increase in social acceptance), or serve as a protective or coping strategy in instances where expressing one’s true or prior identity may pose social, economic, or safety risks.<sup>43,44</sup> That said, passing may not be attainable or even desirable for everyone. To frame passing as something to be universally pursued by LGBTQ2S+ individuals (especially gender minorities) would ultimately uphold the same cisheteronormative norms and ideals that assume and advantage non-LGBTQ2S+ lives. For others, particularly sexual minorities who are attracted to multiple genders, the concept of passing as straight can result in feelings of exclusion and erasure.

## Prejudicial attitudes by colleagues, managers, and clients

Participants described the difficulty of encountering prejudicial attitudes and beliefs from colleagues, managers, and clients on a regular basis. As one participant shared, “As soon as people realized that I was in a relationship with a woman, it started being like, ‘Oh, I don’t want to hug you anymore’” (pansexual woman of Jamaican descent). Other common examples included the use of the term “gay” as a derogatory term in workplace conversations, as well as comments that were dismissive of or ignorant towards the LGBTQ2S+ community:

*These comments about ‘what do you need these gay prides parades for? It’s ridiculous, so vulgar.’ or ‘I don’t care if a person is gay or whatever you call it, but I don’t want to hear about it.’ It’s barely-concealed aggression, or passive aggression.*

*- Two-Spirit lesbian social worker*

In the above example, the participant is grappling with the fact that while comments may not have been directly targeted to her, they were nonetheless deeply harmful to her. Along similar lines, several individuals described being exposed to – and affected by – prejudice in interactions with those to whom they had not disclosed. These types of experiences were especially common among gender minority participants. One woman described driving to an office party with a colleague, who, upon seeing two men walking together, began to rant about how “*gay people are throwing it in everyone’s faces*” (white lesbian transgender woman). The implications of this interaction for our participant were palpable: while she had previously thought of the colleague as someone she might be able to open up to, she characterized this moment as a clear sign the colleague “*was really no friend at all to the LGBTQ+ community.*”

Other trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse participants shared instances of colleagues openly employing cissexist or transphobic rhetoric in the office before they had been out at the workplace. This occurred when coworkers dismissed singular or gender-neutral (e.g., they/them) pronouns as grammatically invalid, as well as condemning gender-neutral or trans-inclusive washrooms on the basis of not wanting “*to piss in the same room as a man*” (white genderqueer and transmasculine participant). Exposure to these beliefs and attitudes – even in the absence of disclosure – was severely distressing for LGBTQ2S+ employees.

Finally, while some participants suspected discrimination underlay these encounters but had no proof, some went further to explain the role microaggressions could play in exposing homophobic and transphobic treatment, and in their decision to ultimately leave specific workplaces:

*What I’ve learned is, you do have to force the conversation even if it means opening yourself up to vulnerability. Because then at least you know they’re actively homophobic, and you can leave. One thing I regret is not responding to microaggressions more actively. But it takes mental*

*work that a lot of queer people do, and especially queer racialized people, about like, 'do I want to have this conversation now? Do I have the bandwidth to go through this with someone?' This trauma is additional workload. It kind of falls on people.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

As the above participant explains, the process of engaging with and responding to prejudicial treatment in the workplace can take a significant mental health toll.

## Stigmatized and sexualized lifestyles and relationships

In the context of cisheteronormativity, the lifestyles and relationships of LGBTQ2S+ employees are not only placed outside society's norms, but considered actively inappropriate or unprofessional in a workplace setting. Experiences of this emerged most commonly in conversations with sexual minority participants. Common workplace interactions – from sharing pregnancy announcements to sharing details about one's family life – were viewed as inherently controversial when they involved LGBTQ2S+ individuals.

In some cases, these experiences went beyond short remarks in conversations. For instance, the Two-Spirit, lesbian social worker introduced earlier shared the following anecdote about a former coworker's reaction to her speaking about her wife and family at work:

*The first week that I was there, a [colleague] who had been there for quite some time called me into her office and said, 'you know, we don't mind you people, as long as you don't talk about it. I don't want to hear anything about it. I don't want to hear about your family, or whatever you call the person you're with. You keep it to yourself, and you and I will get along fine' ... I was so floored. I said, 'I don't know what you imagine goes on in my home, but it sure sounds a lot more exciting than what actually goes on in my home.' It's almost like people think if you're not heterosexual, you're doing all these freaky things.*

*- Two-Spirit lesbian social worker*

The above quote speaks to another way in which participants described their lifestyles and relationships being stigmatized: through attitudes and assumptions about sexuality. It centred on the perception that the nature and frequency of LGBTQ2S+ individuals' sexual activity was fundamentally different or abhorrent. This was raised by several individuals, especially sexual minority women who described experiences of blatant hypersexualization in the workplace (primarily from older, cisgender men) on the basis of their gender, sexuality, and often, age. This included being asked inappropriate questions about their sex lives, being invited to offer tips or advice about sexual activities with women, and being engaged in inappropriate workplace conversations intended to sexualize other women coworkers.



Experiences of stigmatization through sexual behaviour being misunderstood or deemed inappropriate was also common among participants engaging in *polyamory*, which refers to the practice of engaging in multiple, consensual romantic and/or sexual relationships simultaneously. Polyamory is not synonymous with LGBTQ2S+ identity, however, several participants in our study identified both as LGBTQ2S+ and polyamorous and/or non-monogamous. Reflecting on the challenges of engaging in personal conversations with colleagues, one participant described the following experience:

*[My] coworker has a fiancé and was telling me a lot about him. At some point I was like, 'I also want to share about my personal life.' I started telling her about my partner and mentioned his fiancé – because sometimes I forget that not everyone is aware of a poly dynamic, it's so normal to me .... My coworker looked so horrified and offended. I think her immediate thought went into cheating, and what something similar would mean to her relationship .... I feel like every time I want to casually bring something about my personal life, then it's somehow weird, and I have to do a whole background information or explanation.*

*- Queer, pansexual, polyamorous participant*

The above scenario reflects a dilemma for LGBTQ2S+ employees: while conversations about one's personal life are often accepted, expected, and even valuable as a part of many workplace cultures, choosing to conceal one's partnership or relationship status can offer protection and safety. Yet, it may come at the expense of authenticity and the preservation of workplace relationships, in addition to contributing to self-stigmatization. As a result, navigating everyday workplace conversations could be exceedingly challenging for many participants.

## Undermining and discounting of authority, skills, and experience

Many participants reported having their skills and experiences discounted and their authority undermined in employment. These experiences were characterized as identity-based, exacerbated by other marginalized social locations, linked to disclosure, and having tangible effects on career and advancement prospects.

For instance, one participant described displaying a sticker in his office indicating that the space was safe for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Recalling the moment where his supervisor first noticed this – and, presumably, read it as a marker of the participant's own identity – the participant noted that his supervisor “*didn't take me seriously after that*” (queer, Muslim, South Asian man). He went on to attribute this to the sticker's role in acknowledging a difference between them that his supervisor had not previously observed: “*Before, I was someone that was very similar to him in terms of ethnic and religious background. As soon as that difference [sexuality] was introduced, he didn't take me seriously.*”

The questioning of LGBTQ2S+ employees' skills, experiences, and authority was also fueled by prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes, and was therefore exacerbated among participants who faced additional forms of marginalization in the labour market. One participant illustrated this, pointing specifically to anti-Asian racism and assumptions he was younger than he was. He described feeling undermined and overlooked on the basis of both his sexual and racial identity:

*I had questions about whether I was truthful during my interviews. I was questioned about my accomplishments. I was not given opportunities without oversight because I was seen as too young, and inflating my CV, and I couldn't possibly lead this project. So, I think I'm stuck, even though I've had years and years of experience ... It's like Groundhog Day every time I start a new job. I have to wear my glasses. I have to lower my voice a few decibels. I'm not my authentic self, I'm very guarded. That's what I've learned to do in every new job.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

A number of transgender participants identified how gender roles and stereotypes shaped how their experience and skills were valued in the workplace. Following her social transition, one participant described being exposed to sexist attitudes in a way that she previously had not: *"I realized that I didn't have as much power in the workplace as I had previously"* (white lesbian transgender woman). Some transgender men or transmasculine participants had the opposite experience. Upon being perceived as men by their colleagues, they felt as though their knowledge and experiences were more respected: *"I'm keenly aware that as soon as I started passing, I didn't have to defend myself"* (transgender man working in youth services). As with other microaggressions described in this section, the experiences shared here underscore the ongoing, subtle, yet harmful encounters that characterized LGBTQ2S+ individuals' workplace experiences.

## Workplace social exclusion

Participants commonly referenced a sense of isolation and exclusion in the workplace, in particular among those who worked in the absence of other out LGBTQ2S+ colleagues. Isolation and exclusion were often connected to a participant's level of outness at work. Upon disclosing their identity to colleagues, some participants began to be excluded from both on-the-job conversations as well as social events outside the workplace. Importantly, this was in spite of sincere attempts by participants to build relationships with their colleagues, which they saw as further evidence that these experiences were not merely coincidental. As one participant shared:

*At the beginning [of my employment], I made a lot of effort to build relationships, but I've slowed down because a lot of people are not willing to reciprocate that. Is it that you don't want to have relationships with colleagues, or is it you don't want to have a relationship with me?*

*- White genderqueer teacher*

However, experiences of social isolation and exclusion were not exclusively tied to outness. As discussed in the section on cisheteronormative interactions and encounters, instances such as colleagues using heavily gendered language may not only signal to LGBTQ2S+ employees that disclosing is unsafe, but may actively lead to their withdrawal from workplace conversations and social events:

*It can be hard – especially when you are very selective of who you are out to – when people are just casually talking about their weekend plans and getting together with their husband or their wife, and they're being very, very gendered in their language. Not really being able to engage in those conversations, because you're not quite sure whether or not you are comfortable being out with those people.*

*- Queer, biromantic, asexual participant*

Participants who did not disclose their identity due to anticipated prejudice and discrimination shared common challenges when it came to building relationships with colleagues, as a result of needing to hide routine parts of their life and fearing accidental disclosure. In other instances, participants – whether they were out or not – identified sociocultural barriers to building workplace relationships, and struggled to meaningfully relate to colleagues whose lived experiences were very different. In the words of one individual, “*all the straight men are bonding, ‘oh, football,’ ‘oh, I got married,’ but I don’t have that*” (white genderqueer teacher).

Some participants drew direct connections between social experiences at work and opportunities for advancement. As this same teacher explained, “*I know that by building relationships, that builds to upward career trajectory. That’s why I go to those things.*” In short, LGBTQ2S+ employees experiencing social exclusion and isolation at work may face additional barriers when it comes developing strong workplace relationships and cultivating professional networks.

## NAVIGATING A CAREER

Beyond individual-level experiences with colleagues, managers, and clients, participants shared how the need to constantly navigate complex – and often inequitable – systems and structures in employment fundamentally shaped their careers. This section explores this navigation in greater detail. It is organized across four main themes: 1) income and employment precarity and insecurity; 2) negotiating safety and inclusion in the labour market; 3) cisheteronormative systems, policies, and infrastructure; and 4) challenges with workplace equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts.

## Income and employment precarity and insecurity

An overarching sense of precarity of work and income insecurity complicated the employment journeys of many of the LGBTQ2S+ individuals we spoke with. Some reported working multiple jobs in order to secure a livable income, as well as to ensure they had back-up employment in case of termination. For them, this fear was closely related to anticipated discrimination regarding disclosure or being outed. Others described precarious employment situations, including a reliance on contract work, positions that were heavily dependent on funding, and roles subject to probationary periods that would allow for termination of their employment at any time. Some relied on partners with more secure employment to access adequate income as well as employment-related benefits. As one woman described:

*I definitely don't make enough to live on. I also am very lucky that I have a partner who has a very stable, well-paying job. In terms of household income, it's fine. If I was by myself, I would absolutely need two or three other jobs ... I think a sort of looming anxiety at all times is because I rely on my partner so much for my income.*

*- Bisexual woman employed as a voice actor*

Concerned about income precarity, several participants described being intensely focused on ensuring they were meeting or exceeding performance expectations and well-liked by colleagues. This sometimes resulted in concealment of their LGBTQ2S+ identity. One participant linked their behaviour – especially early in their job – to prejudicial and harmful beliefs about LGBTQ2S+ people being inherently unprofessional, especially as someone working with youth:

*I am so hypersensitive as to how I am being perceived by others ... in order to protect myself. Because it would be so easy [for my employer to be] like, 'no, you're gone, you're done.' I would probably be fired for something that a lot of people would get a slap on the wrist for.*

*- White genderqueer teacher*

Others attempted to reduce income and employment precarity by making job-related sacrifices, such as opting to work for a company whose values did not align but which offered greater stability, or taking a pay cut to move to an industry with union protections, pay transparency, and health benefits. One participant, who had moved from the private sector to academia, expanded on this, noting that moving industries resulted in “a cut in pay, but definitely a lot more stability ... Sometimes I fantasize about going back to higher pay... [but] there's reluctance – even more than before I transitioned – to go into private workplaces without any protection” (white lesbian transgender woman). For others, enduring unsafe or otherwise undesirable work environments was not a question of choice, but one of necessity, in order to pay their bills. As one participant explained: “I just need to endure. At the end of the day, my colleagues won't want

*to associate with [me when I tell them I am gay]. I have to endure those times until I find something else better and can move on” (gay, African American immigrant).*

Experiences of precarity also shaped and were shaped by health-related challenges and the availability of appropriate health and other employee benefits. Some participants noted that their jobs did not have benefits, while others had benefits that lacked extended coverage for mental health supports, sick leave, and parental leave. The importance of extended health benefits and improved mental health coverage in particular was repeatedly raised by participants. While many relied on their employers to provide these supports, many acknowledged the irony of needing greater support than they might otherwise, as a result of workplace stress, prejudice, and discrimination: *“I’m really waiting to pass my probation, so that my insurance can kick in, so that I can afford long-term counselling to work on the stress this job has given me” (Chinese-Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian).*

For still others, experiences of precarity – and the willingness to endure difficult workplace situations as a result – were informed by other factors. One participant, referencing inappropriate comments from coworkers, remarked that:

*Because I’m so junior, I have to take it in stride, and not make a comment, and not rock the boat, because I don’t want to lose my job. I will hide it with people that I know make comments like that, that I know are [in the position to] make a decision about my employability.*

*- White queer cis woman*

Having comparably less experience and seniority than her colleagues, this woman chose not to address sexist remarks to avoid risks to her job stability. At the same time, experiences of prejudice or discrimination on the basis of one identity characteristic (e.g., gender) frequently led to participants opting to conceal their LGBTQ2S+ identity to avoid negative reactions. This made for especially stressful work environments for multiply marginalized participants, enhancing and compounding their sense of employment precarity.

## Negotiating safety and inclusion in career decision-making

LGBTQ2S+ individuals must invest skill, time, and resources to ensure safety and inclusion in employment. In interviews and focus groups, participants described extensive and detailed processes they used to assess the safety of a position, workplace, occupation, or industry. The negotiation was further complicated by interacting and intersecting systems of oppression (i.e., for multiply marginalized participants) and the need to balance income, career, and other issues and priorities. In negotiating employment and the labour market, participants in our study collectively described a complex approach with multiple stages, as described below.

## 1. Selecting industry, occupation, and geography

Certain industries, occupations, and geographic locations were described as more or less safe for sexual or gender minority individuals. While not infallible as predictors – some participants shared instances in which their expectations were not confirmed in practice – these nonetheless emerged as key indicators for LGBTQ2S+ individuals making employment decisions.

In considering industry and occupation, those in which women and men had traditionally been overrepresented (e.g., education and skilled trades, respectively) were generally perceived to be either more or less safe. One participant who had transitioned from aviation to the non-profit sector, contended that, *"when I had that flip from that alpha male-dominant environment to one that was more about equity, diversity, and inclusion, I saw a drastic change in my mental health and the way I perceived my work environment"* (gay man working multiple jobs). Mission-driven organizations with a stated focus on issues related to social justice and equity were also viewed as more likely to be inclusive and accepting.

The perceived benefits of safer and more inclusive occupations and industries shaped LGBTQ2S+ individuals' decisions to pursue careers in these fields. Recalling leaving the pharmaceutical industry to go into academia, one participant suggested that, *"there was really never any possibility of transitioning, or coming out as queer in any way, in those previous positions"* (white lesbian transgender woman). Not needing to worry about disclosure or feeling pressured to come out was of utmost importance for many participants. Moreover, several suggested that working in industries and occupations that were open and safe for LGBTQ2S+ people had direct and positive implications for their mental health.

It is worth noting that the shift towards safer industries and occupations was often characterized as coming with a pay penalty. This was explicitly named by several participants, including the participant who moved from aviation to the non-profit sector. At the same time, some framed their choice of industry or occupation as a function of anticipated prejudice and discrimination. One participant framed their decision to pursue a teaching career as jointly driven by the education sector's commitment to inclusion and its normalized use of transparent pay scales:

*I consciously went into education because it's very overtly stated as an inclusive space or working towards an inclusive space ... There's also the element of pay ladders and pay scales that are very public, so I would say pay inequity is something that's pretty hard to get away with in my sphere and in my employment.*

*- White genderqueer teacher*

Finally, some participants described the role of geography in informing employment decisions. Within Canada, smaller towns, suburban areas, and certain provinces (e.g., Alberta, Saskatchewan) were framed by some as unsafe for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. One participant



articulated the diverse factors that make it challenging to live and work as a bisexual woman in her town: *“There’s a lot of violence, especially towards out gay men. It’s a very industry-heavy town. We’re on the Highway of Tears; there’s a lot of anti-Indigenous racism and violence. Standing out in any way can be scary”* (bisexual woman living in a small town).

For others, personal experience with anti-LGBTQ2S+ violence and prejudice led to their decision to work in a specific region. One participant explained his choice to work in the community he grew up in:

*“I grew up in that neighbourhood and it’s extremely homophobic, transphobic, very dangerous. I didn’t have any supports growing up, so I had to go outside [the community to access them]. When I got into social work, seeing [the supports] still hadn’t been developed, I decided to develop them myself”*

- Transgender man working in youth services

## 2. Conducting research on organizations and employment opportunities

Recognizing that employers vary substantially in terms of their commitment to and capacity for supporting respectful environments for LGBTQ2S+ employees, participants described adopting a range of strategies to make informal assessments about safety and inclusion when exploring job opportunities. They identified several indicators that signaled to them that a prospective employer could prove to be safe or inclusive, both in initial research as well as throughout the application and interview process. Examples of these are shared below:

### Indicators of inclusion in employment research

- **Job postings** being shared on LGBTQ2S+-specific fora (e.g., social media pages, via community partners).
- A stated **organizational commitment** to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, and the reflection of this in the employer’s mission and values.
- Explicit efforts to **recruit applicants who are LGBTQ2S+** or otherwise equity-deserving groups. Participants sought to understand employers’ motivation for this to avoid tokenizing environments, and appreciated employers sharing their rationale with prospective candidates.
- **Social media content** that reflects a genuine and ongoing commitment to LGBTQ2S+ and other forms of equity.
- Facilitated opportunities for **self-disclosure** during the application process. Many valued and sought opportunities to self-disclose; this included transgender applicants who wanted to gauge workplace safety or seek information about employer benefits and accommodations, and those

who perceived their lived experience as a potential asset. Some regarded space dedicated to self-identification (e.g., on application forms) with suspicion, especially in the absence of clarity about the purpose of collecting such data. Employers who provided optional, safe, and confidential opportunities to self-disclose were generally perceived as safer and more trusting.

- Evidence of **regular and normalized pronoun-sharing** within the workplace (e.g., on website staff biographies, in email signatures).
- **Organizational leadership, staff, board members, and volunteers** that reflect an employer's stated commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- **Tangible and visible actions** being taken toward LGBTQ2S+ inclusion, including the support of and partnership with LGBTQ2S+-led and -serving organizations and – in certain contexts – engagement with these issues on a programmatic level.
- A willingness to be **forthcoming about their approach to LGBTQ2S+ safety and inclusion** (e.g., regarding work culture, benefits, and other relevant policies – regardless of disclosure).

### *3. Preparing job applications*

LGBTQ2S+ individuals frequently shared accounts of trying to decide how to present themselves during the application process, particularly if, when, and how to disclose their gender and/or sexual identity. For some participants, this included removing or adapting potential “red flags” from their resumes, such as work or volunteer experience with LGBTQ2S+ community organizations. Others discussed their visibility online and grappled with decisions about whether to explicitly or implicitly convey their LGBTQ2S+ identity on social media. For instance, they deliberated on the inclusion of pronouns in profile bios or in posting LGBTQ2S+-specific content.

Furthermore, when completing application intake forms, participants were sometimes equivocal about any option to self-identify. While some saw this as potentially benefiting them (especially among queer- and trans-focused organizations), many expressed fears that such information might serve to bias employers and recruiters or be used to discriminate against them.

### *4. Navigating the interview process*

Job interviews represented a critical opportunity for LGBTQ2S+ jobseekers to assess safety and inclusion at a prospective workplace. In a few instances, participants described explicitly asking questions about an organization's culture and inclusion commitments during an interview. More commonly, participants perceived interviews to be another moment characterized by difficult decisions regarding if and how to disclose. While several individuals felt that not disclosing might increase their chances of securing an offer, many framed disclosure as an opportunity to gauge whether or not the workplace was likely to be safe for them.

Given this, some people shared that they consistently self-identified as LGBTQ2S+ during the interview process as a means of avoiding being hired by a potentially unsafe employer, even though this meant possibly losing opportunities. One participant described what negotiating this process had looked like for them, highlighting themes of identity concealment, modifying one's gender presentation, and identifying the appropriate moment to “test” a prospective employer:

*When I applied, I looked quite different than what I look like now ... If I came in [looking like I do now] for my interview, would I have got the job? Because I very consciously dressed down for my first interview, because I wanted to present in a way I thought they wanted me to look ... On the one hand I need the job and the contract, but on the other hand I don't want to get myself into a place where there will be violence. I decided to go there [later in the interview process] but I shouldn't even have to think about that.*

- White genderqueer teacher

Referring to the ongoing challenges of finding safe organizations and workplaces or securing jobs commensurate with their experience, some participants described making the decision to actively conceal their identity in order to ensure their financial survival. Anticipating discrimination should he identify as LGBTQ2S+ during an interview, one participant described pursuing concealment “*just to increase [his] chances of getting a job*” (bisexual Black architect). For another participant, concealment during the interview stage represented a short-term strategy to attain employment, although not without potential consequences:

*I pretended I wasn't trans when applying for this job ... I didn't want anything to stop me from getting it ... It's mostly old white cis men where I work. I feel like as much as they might be good people, [they might also think that] it might be easier if we hired somebody else who will be less trouble. I definitely feel guilty about that, but I also feel like it's a little bit of survival mode: I literally need this job, I need to make more money, and I will do anything to get it. So I was like, I guess we'll just let ourselves be misgendered for a week and see what happens.*

- Transmasculine non-binary participant

Other participants made similar decisions to avoid disclosure, after having done in earlier interviews. For instance, one woman shared that her current approach to disclosure in interviews had been foundationally shaped by perceived instances of discrimination:

*I've consciously decided I will not, going forward, out myself in the interview process. I used to because I wanted to be honest, and I wanted to get a read on the employer ... to see their reaction and body language if I casually talk about my partner and my queerness. But ... I've faced so many moments of pay discrimination in the last few years, I can't risk it anymore. And I feel gross about it, I'll be honest. I hate it because it's everything I stand against, but I'm poor.*

- Bisexual white woman

## 5. Presentation throughout early employment and probation

Participants explained the mental toll that went into navigating how they were perceived by those around them, including efforts to not make colleagues uncomfortable. Especially early on in employment, we heard how LGBTQ2S+ participants made concerted efforts to “police” their identities and presentation to avoid jeopardizing their employment:

*Especially early on, I didn't put anything [about my identity on social media]. I didn't want to put anything too political, because it might cost me a client, I want the work, experience, I don't want to offend anybody. After some time, okay, “let's think about this...if I put, ‘oh I'm a queer woman,’” who is that going to stop from contacting me?*

*- Bisexual woman employed as a voice actor*

Furthermore, participants shared many examples of adjusting language, avoiding talking about partners, and investing considerable time considering how their clothing choices would be perceived by others. One participant explained, *“Everyday, trying to get dressed would be fighting myself, my anxiety, my dysphoria .... It's like I'm self-policing my existence because I'm wondering if people are thinking about what I look like, or if other people are policing my modes of expression”* (Black, agender and queer participant).

## 6. Ongoing management, negotiation, and mediation of disclosure

There were several broader considerations around disclosure in employment which had longer-term results on both participants' career trajectories, and their lives outside of employment. Some participants described choosing to remain closeted because of their awareness that it was not safe to be out in their industry or community. They expected and/or feared that being out at work would have broader impacts for their lives and careers, including the possibility of harm in the community where they lived. As one participant explained:

*A lot of people choose to stay under the radar for a fear of harm or violence ... When I was interviewing in town, I was not going to talk about that. You're aware of the kind of context, you're aware that it may not necessarily be safe to do that in an interview.*

*- Bisexual woman living in a small town*

For some, being out at work could have consequences that extended into their private lives. For example, the same participant described being hired for a summer position while she was in university, but still living at home with her family. At the time, she was dating her partner in secret because she anticipated rejection from her family. She learned that one of her new colleagues knew her partner, and they also knew her sister. She described the stressful process

of having to approach the new colleague and explain the situation to protect herself from any disclosure to her family, which could have put her in an unsafe situation at home.

Many LGBTQ2S+ individuals described using reactions to other aspects of their identity that they were not able to conceal, as a way of gauging safety. For example, if they experienced racism or sexism, they would be unlikely to disclose their gender or sexual identity, because they could anticipate homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia. As one participant explained, *“Sometimes in the back they say some racist things, so I’m definitely not coming out to you guys ... If you say anything sexist or racist, I’m just assuming you have the whole package and you’re homophobic”* (pansexual woman of Jamaican descent).

Some participants chose to remain closeted because of the risk that disclosure would lead to their skills and experience being discounted. For example, one bisexual cis woman explained that she remained closeted at work because she feared that if she were out, she wouldn’t be given as many of the opportunities she needed to build her research portfolio for a PhD application.

For many LGBTQ2S+ people who are not cis- or straight-passing, the job application process can be extremely stressful. Navigating interviews was particularly challenging for them, since they did not know how they would be received, given the risk of prejudice and discrimination. We heard that navigating disclosure and presentation in the labour market was especially exhausting and resource intensive for gender diverse people. As one participant said, *“Because [you] quickly get picked out and people’s biases come into play. And then you don’t get the job, or you get little micro aggressions and comments or looks”* (transgender man working in youth services). On the other hand, some participants who were cis- or straight-passing or had the ability to choose whether or not to disclose discussed it as a privilege they were aware of, and sometimes relied on, to counter job precarity or to avoid being unemployed or underpaid.

Other participants described similar experiences, including a Two-Spirit lesbian social worker whose colleagues made it clear they were not happy to work with her because of her sexual orientation. Similarly, other participants described receiving an ultimatum of sorts: they could continue working in their positions, as long as they kept their identity to themselves.

## Cisheteronormative systems and policies

Participants told us how systems and policies that are arguably not designed with the intent of discriminating against LGBTQ2S+ employees can nevertheless have that effect, and constrain their employment and career choices.

Commonly referenced examples involved policies or spaces premised on the gender binary, as well as those built on the assumption that an individual’s gender aligned with their sex assigned at birth. Dress codes – especially when explicitly-gendered – frequently made LGBTQ2S+ feel

uncomfortable, required them to adopt non-affirming gender expressions, or coerced them to disclose information about their gender identity or presentation to their employer.

Washrooms represented yet another challenge. At workplaces with exclusively gendered washrooms, participants described being forced to choose between using a washroom that did not align with their gender identity or risk exposure to gender-based violence and harassment. When workplaces did have gender-neutral washrooms facilities, they could be inconveniently located or intended to interchangeably serve as accessible washrooms. One participant problematized the merging of gender-neutral and accessible washrooms, noting that this approach “*clumps marginalized identities together that actually have very different needs in terms of the bathroom, so sometimes I feel like I’m taking up that space that someone won’t be able to use*” (white genderqueer and transmasculine participant).

Several participants highlighted ways in which information technology reinforced discriminatory practices, particularly towards gender minority individuals. Complicated or bureaucratic processes for name and gender changes, for instance, put users at risk of being deadnamed or misgendered. This arose in workplace systems that interacted with external structures (e.g., insurance providers or the Canada Revenue Agency), which use linked data that may not reflect individuals’ current name or gender. One person spoke to the limitations of a platform used at their workplace that regularly referred to trans users by the wrong name:

*Individuals who are using a different name professionally and personally are logging into this time billing system, which is linked to their payroll, and they’re seeing their deadname ... Is there a way to use aliases or to somehow work within that system to allow an individual to have their preferred name? [To] make them feel more welcome, and not that every time they log in to check in for work, they feel discriminated against and hurt because of the system?*

*- Queer, biromantic, asexual participant*

Finally, workplace benefits policies were described as enmeshed in cisheteronormativity, and thereby failing to address the needs and realities of LGBTQ2S+ employees. The following case vignette illustrates the ways in which cisheteronormative benefits systems and policies can inadvertently disadvantage and harm LGBTQ2S+ employees.



### Case vignette 3: Medical transition, gender affirmation, and the limits of workplace policies

*Drawn from an account of a white lesbian transgender woman:*

The health aspects of transitioning at work have been a little bit frustrating. When you have medical – essentially surgical – things to accomplish, you schedule them to be the least disruptive to your work as possible, as much as you can. I've got massive protection in terms of vacation time: I was able to basically do my surgeries during the summer when I wasn't teaching, at least two of them. For the third surgery, I didn't have any control over the scheduling, and that one had a much longer recovery.

I discovered along the way that if I took more than 10 sick days, I would be booted out of the workplace into disability [leave]. That did put pressure on me to get back to work right away. On the one hand, you've probably heard that it's best not to linger, to get back into the workplace and activities as quickly as possible after any major medical events or surgeries. But I probably would have spent more time recovering had I not been faced with that.

I actually had to argue with HR. Essentially, I worked out a situation where we were able to hire a replacement instructor, and I would only call in sick on the days I needed to teach. I limited the number of sick days I would need to take over the course of a month, so I wasn't pushed into disability. Because once you're pushed into that category, you can't easily get back to work again. You need all kinds of doctor's evaluations. There's actually a disability committee at work that only meets a certain number of times that has to approve your return to work. I would have been out of teaching for an extended period of time, and that isn't at all what I wanted to do.

So, I did have to deal with that whole medical workplace issue, and I did go back to work much sooner than I probably would have. It was frustrating, and awkward, and literally painful.

## Challenges in workplace equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts

While employer efforts to promote more equitable and inclusive workplaces were viewed as essential and appreciated by LGBTQ2S+ employees, these approaches often presented challenges of different types.

**Performative inclusion** can result when individuals or organizations promote a public perception of being inclusive while failing to take practical or tangible steps in pursuit of this aim.<sup>45</sup> Participants shared that this was widespread in workplaces, citing examples of employers who falsely advertised and promoted themselves as being inclusive of LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Participants described applying for jobs that proclaimed a commitment to organizational

diversity, and subsequently being interviewed by older, white men in leadership, which they interpreted as a signal of performative inclusion. In other cases, performative inclusion took the form of organizations purporting to be committed to equity without having the appropriate institutional and organization policies in place. For instance, participants described employers that celebrated Pride but did not provide LGBTQ2S+-inclusive parental leave, or support employees seeking gender-affirming healthcare.

Participants often regarded current or prospective workplaces engaging in performative inclusion with suspicion: “[If] I see every colour of the rainbow on your Instagram but when I look at your staff page your top five people are all white cis males, something is not adding up between the two” (gay man working multiple jobs). Particularly in the application and hiring processes, these types of experiences signaled to LGBTQ2S+ individuals that an employer may in fact not be inclusive, and that they might face identity-based barriers, prejudice, and discrimination should they proceed in the role.

Multiple participants shared unwanted experiences of tokenization in the workplace: “I don’t want to be the token gay person in the company. I don’t want my image or my experiences to be used as an example of how welcoming or ‘diverse’ that organization is” (Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian). Others described similar experiences, resenting employers whom they believed had used their LGBTQ2S+ identity to craft an image of diversity that was often not supported by concrete or comprehensive workplace practices.

## Performative inclusion

Performative inclusion (sometimes also called performative diversity) occurs when individuals or organizations promote a public perception of being inclusive and diverse without undertaking practical actions in pursuit of this aim.<sup>45</sup> Performative inclusion typically involves “performatives” – for instance, a company statement declaring a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion – that may be enacted to avoid potential litigation or scrutiny from consumers or stakeholders. In practice, those engaging in performative inclusion fail to undertake actions that meaningfully identify or address the underlying culture or structures that maintain power, privilege, the subordination of historically marginalized individuals and communities.<sup>46</sup>

Those who were out at work widely reported being asked by management to participate in workplace initiatives surrounding EDI. This involved taking on additional tasks over and above their roles in order to support and educate their colleagues, both informally (e.g., through conversations and emotional support) or formally (e.g., through participation in committees, the development of educational resources, and the delivery of training). Regardless of whether they were explicitly asked to participate, many participants described wanting to support their communities and improve their workplaces through these initiatives.

Yet participants also expressed concerns around engaging in tasks to support EDI initiatives. Often, they described a reluctance to take on these roles due to a fear of being pigeon-holed within a role that did not align with their actual career aspirations. Many were keen to challenge the assumption that LGBTQ2S+ employees were necessarily interested in these roles as a result of their identity, and felt that their involvement could risk overshadowing other career goals. As one participant explained, *“Instead of me just being a math teacher or a teacher in general, it’s ‘oh, you’re the ... queer teacher, you’re the non-binary teacher”* (white genderqueer teacher).

When they chose to engage in workplace EDI initiatives, many LGBTQ2S+ individuals were frustrated by the lack of follow-through on recommendations that were made, as well as the lack of authority typically afforded to these efforts: *“We were told to speak truth to power, but we were never given permission to speak truth to power”* (gay, East Asian man working in the public sector). Some described situations where this work was severely under resourced; they failed to receive compensation, paid leave, or other formal acknowledgement for the additional labour they had undertaken. In some cases, although the request was framed as a voluntary contribution to the workplace, participants experienced negative consequences upon declining to participate:

*I turned down an opportunity to sit on an EDI committee. I wouldn’t say I was punished for it, but I was told I wasn’t contributing to the organization, so I wasn’t given other opportunities. It went over their heads, why a racialized person would not want to participate.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

Some participants saw their engagement in workplace EDI initiatives as an opportunity to grow their careers, and to meaningfully support LGBTQ2S+ inclusion. Some were keen to have their experience and expertise leveraged and understood as an asset, and felt that offering educating and training to open-minded colleagues represented an important opportunity to advance workplace inclusion. Still, participants criticized employers’ tendency to place the burden on LGBTQ2S+ employees to improve workplace safety and inclusion rather than seeking external and more structural solutions. As one participant explained, *“I can’t be responsible for other people’s learning anymore. That’s got to be on them, because I’ve got bigger fish to fry ... It’s like scooping out a bucket with a spoon while it’s being poured out by the gallon”* (Two-Spirit lesbian social worker).

The following case vignette builds on this, illustrating the complexities of workplace inclusion efforts that may unknowingly or unintentionally create further challenges for LGBTQ2S+ employees.

## Case vignette 4: “All I was doing was advocating for myself”: Navigating workplace inclusion

*Drawn from anonymized experiences of one participant:*

This participant, who worked in the youth non-profit sector, noted gaps in some of the programming their employer had been delivering: *“The program itself wasn’t really set up for trans youth.”* Acknowledging these gaps, the participant developed training for their workplace, with a specific emphasis on trans inclusion and gender diversity. Following this, they were asked by management to deliver the training to staff. Cognizant of their own capacity and boundaries – this participant had come out at work less than a year prior – they requested that no discussion be hosted following the training and that any questions be directed to management. Despite this, they still received messages from colleagues following the training, including requests for support that the participant found exceptionally challenging and unsupported to address:

*“I ended up having to emotionally support a colleague who was really upset and dysregulated because they were embarrassed that they didn’t know these things. That was on top of work capacity that I was already having a hard time managing. I expressed that to my managers: this is exactly why I was a little hesitant to do the training. I had my capacity worked out; I set my boundary. You can’t always ask the queer person do it, and this is why.”*

Although the participant observed some positive outcomes that emerged from the training, they also pointed to several issues that undermined the work they had done; members of management had not completed the training, and coworkers continued to misgender the participant despite regularly being informed of their pronouns. Meanwhile, the organization promoted the fact that staff had developed and received training on this subject. As the participant noted, *“It’s just teaching people the words to say, [but they] keep doing what they’re doing .... I worry a bit when these kinds of things are being done but not done properly. It almost becomes more dangerous; celebrating as a safe space but they’re not.”*

This participant, who was white, was later asked to provide anti-racism training, which they declined. As they shared, *“I think I was tokenized into providing that, and had to set pretty clear boundaries about my capacity in educating people about racism as a white person .... I can speak to maybe trans or queer issues, not that I necessarily want to all the time. Basically, all I was doing was advocating for myself, and then I was asked to speak for others, outside of my experience and capacity.”*

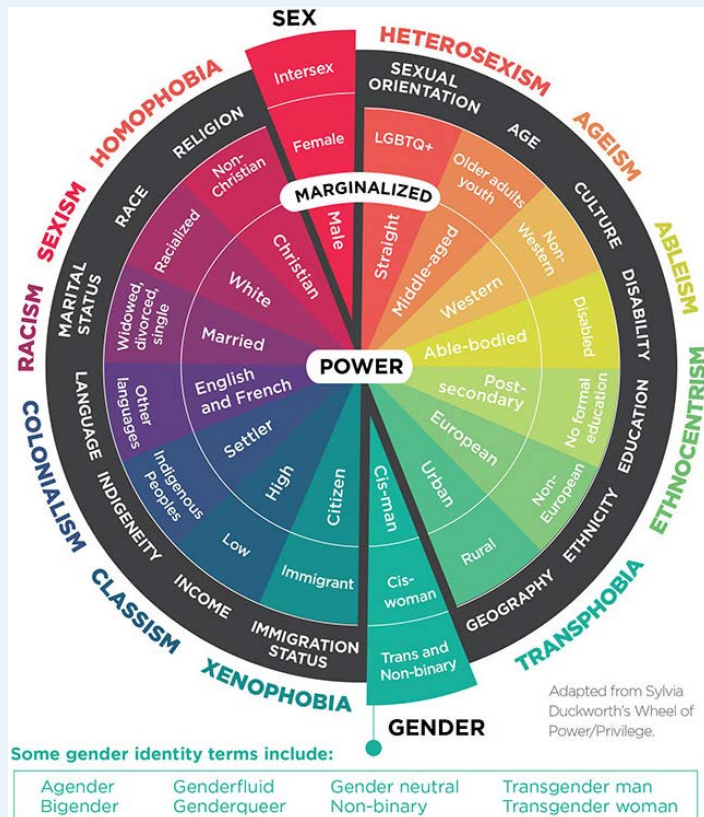
## CUMULATIVE EXPERIENCES ACROSS SOCIAL LOCATIONS, LIFE DOMAINS, AND THE LIFE COURSE

Broadly, career decisions influence how individuals experience their entire lives; simultaneously, other aspects of their lives influence their experiences of employment. This means the labour market experiences of sexual and gender minorities are far more than a workplace issue. In both interviews and focus groups, it was apparent that participants' experiences in employment were shaped by their diverse social locations, both in addition to, and in combination with, their gender and sexual identities. Similarly, the factors – and particularly disadvantages – they described as driving their experiences in the labour market were inextricably linked to those they also experienced in other life domains, such as education, housing, or health care. To conclude this section, therefore, we discuss the ways in which negative experiences navigating the world of work can accrue and compound across social locations, life domains, and over the life course.

### Intersectionality and the Wheel of Power/Privilege

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and grounded in Black feminist thought, intersectionality proposes that “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive characteristics, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities.”<sup>47,48</sup> Intersectionality rejects the notion that experiences of marginalization are merely additive. At its core, intersectionality is about power structures, and the interacting and reinforcing relationship between sexism, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism, colonialism, classism, and other axes of oppression.

Adapted from Sylvia Duckworth's Wheel of Power/Privilege,<sup>49</sup> this visual from Greta Bauer offers a comprehensive summary of processes of oppression, discrimination, privilege, power, and marginalization in the Canadian context.<sup>50</sup>



## Social location and identity in employment

In addition to gender identity and sexual orientation, other social locations such as sex, race, ethnicity, immigration status, disability, age, and geography can further confer advantage or disadvantage for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Workplaces characterized as homo/bi/transphobic were often perceived as equally unsafe for those occupying other marginalized social locations, and participants expressed uncertainty as to which of their identities were driving inequities: *“Sometimes I don’t know whether it’s my immigration status that’s the barrier, or my sexuality and gender presentation, or my disability”* (Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian).

However, in participants’ accounts, multiple systems of power and oppression tended to coalesce to create distinct forms of disadvantage. As one participant explained: *“The layers of being a sexual minority, an ethnic minority, a religious minority in a homogenous, predominantly white, cisgender, heteronormative society made it very difficult to be able to function”* (queer, Muslim, South Asian man).

Participants spoke to the unique ways in which their LGBTQ2S+ identity intersected with other social locations to shape employment and related outcomes. LGBTQ2S+ individuals from rural communities tended to face a greater likelihood of discrimination both in and outside of work, while lacking access to a potentially-supportive queer community that more frequently exists in urban centres: *“Although you have a whole lot of people who care about you and will reach out to help [in rural communities], there’s also such a huge gap in knowledge and education and awareness”* (Two-Spirit lesbian social worker). Those identifying or perceived as women pointed to the harm caused by hyper-sexualization in the workplace, while sexual minority men framed toxic masculinity as an important contributor to their social exclusion at work. Those experiencing marginalization along the lines of class identified a lack of social capital and access to networks as a specific drivers of employment outcomes. As one participant shared, *“I grew up poor ... and I grew up in a rural community too. I didn’t have the same social capital to enter into the field. I had to kind of hustle”* (bisexual white woman). Finally, a few individuals with disabilities depicted feeling like a burden in the workplace, in some cases electing to endure one form of disadvantage to justify seeking support for another.

Racialized sexual and gender minorities spoke to distinct stereotypes existing at the intersection of racism and homo/bi/transphobia, with perceptible employment-related consequences. One participant shared his experiences of how emasculation and infantilization affected his relationships with coworkers and the job tasks he was assigned:

*The big ones are race and sexual orientation, and it’s both at the same time that I am experiencing. It’s an intersection. I think about a straight Asian man, it would be very different. I think the racism wouldn’t be this youth-oriented, ‘you’re so young.’ My community is*



*considered effeminate, it creates a different level of discrimination. For me it's, 'oh, he's so cute, I just want to help him.'*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

On the other hand, several participants discussed the protective nature of their whiteness, conferring advantage in a way that their gender or sexual identity did not.

Participants' experiences trying to advocate for themselves were often nuanced by other aspects of their identity, such as their age, race, and disability status. Younger participants, for instance, reported that their concerns were often not taken seriously because they were perceived as inexperienced. Other participants who identified with multiple marginalized identities reported a sense that their workplaces saw them as having “*too many issues.*” For example, one participant said: “*I'm also disabled, and so I have to ask for a lot of access needs, but that, on top of asking for the proper pronouns and name to be used, tends to wear on people's patience sometimes, and I'm sure that's amplified for people with other identities as well*” (white genderqueer and transmasculine participant).

One participant – the same gay, East Asian man cited above – spoke at length about how his sexuality and race interacted to affect his employment experiences and outcomes:

*I get a lot of praise, but in really coded ways ... When I have applied for jobs, my own manager said, 'you need more experience,' and I said, 'I have 10 years of experience ... What more do you want from me?' ... All my white colleagues [are] having a fabulous time, they're getting opportunities, they're getting promotions, they're getting ahead. I'm happy for them. But that is the differential that we face: we're the ones that have to leave teams in order to get opportunities. That's an opportunity cost. That's a mental health cost, that I'm the one that has to pay for a therapist every time I've got microaggressions thrown at me ... I'm the one that has had sleepless nights because my manager said a few things that completely invisibilize my leadership. It's not my white colleagues [who experience this].*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

This quote speaks to how social location can influence the accumulation of advantage and/or disadvantage, creating employment inequities. It also begins to illustrate the interconnectedness of dis/advantage in different life domains, to which we now turn.

## Interaction between employment and other life domains

In addition to inequities driven by intersecting social locations, participants articulated the interrelatedness of employment and other life domains. Social, health, and other experiences and

outcomes shape – and often reinforce – those in the realm of employment. Reflecting on this, a queer Asian man shared the following:

*When I'm stressed out about my experience as a queer man or as an Asian man, in any stream of my life – housing, banking, social life – those are all integrated and compounding. Really, if I'm juggling more discrimination outside of work than more privileged colleagues, I'm just exhausted, right?*

*- Asian, cisgender gay man*

Sentiments like this challenged the notion that employment exists in a vacuum, instead contending that discriminatory and other negative experiences outside employment have direct consequences in people's work lives. This participant went on to describe feeling unable to keep “*fighting more for myself*” (Asian, cisgender gay man) in terms of promotion opportunities at work, explicitly attributing this to the sense of exhaustion that accompanies ongoing marginalization in his various life domains.

LGBTQ2S+ participants faced a heightened risk of exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination outside the workplace, including in their interactions with family members and peers, housing providers, financial institutions, and health, social, and education providers. When these disparate systems failed to work for them, some LGBTQ2S+ people were left thinking, “*It's literally like the systems are screaming at me, 'we're not made for you'*” (queer, Muslim, South Asian man). This was echoed by others: a few participants struggled to grapple with ongoing family rejection while balancing full-time work, while others described an urgent need for inclusive and affirming health care eclipsing their work performance and advancement potential:

*Almost every time I have any kind of interaction with the health care system, I'm reminded of ... ignorance, or I have to educate the healthcare professional and that happens all the time. It's like, wait a minute, you are the professional and I'm educating you on what transgender is. That's ridiculous. It also retriggers because it brings me back to – I'm different. I'm that outcast. I'm that freak. It really triggers that core belief that was created in me that I'm trying to work at changing [...] that core belief when society continues to reinforce it.*

*- Transgender man working in youth services*

Importantly, participant stories pointed to the multi-directional nature of the relationship between employment and non-employment experiences and outcomes. For example, here is how one participant described the consequences of a stressful work environment on both their physical health and relationship with their partner:

*My current job created a lot of stress and it's led to my migraines. It's also led to me being more irritable, which leads to more conflict in my relationship with my partner. I really don't like that, and it's something that I'm trying to work on with a counsellor ... I don't have insurance,*

*so I'm at the mercy of short-term counseling at understaffed, underfunded community health agencies, and appointments are few and far between. I'm really waiting to pass my probation, so that my insurance can kick in, so that I can afford long-term counselling to work on the stress this job has given me.*

*- Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian*

This participant simultaneously acknowledged the financial burden of addressing these repercussions, as well as the irony of needing to work to be able to afford formal mental health support for work-related stress. Experiences like this shed light on the complex interaction between the employment, health, and social domains.

Ultimately, looking solely to the workplace to explain employment outcomes overlooks the fact that LGBTQ2S+ people, like everyone, live full and complex lives outside of their jobs. Inevitably, inequities experienced in other domains of life may further drive and compound those within employment – and vice versa.

## Cumulative experience over the life course

Finally, participant stories underscored the relationship between cumulative disadvantage over the life course and negative employment experiences at each stage along the way. Early life experiences of LGBTQ2S+ people were frequently characterized by bias and disadvantage. This tended to have long-standing economic impacts, like the ones reported by this participant: *“I was unemployed and I experienced some difficulty at that point in my life. And economically I'm still bearing the burden of that, still trying to catch up, even though that was eight or nine years ago”* (bisexual cis woman). At the time of the interview, this woman was working as an emergency nurse as well as in teaching and research assistant roles as part of her doctoral studies, in order to generate a livable income.

Early negative life experiences often carried implications for the social capital of our participants, including constraining access to support and resources. However, they could also have behavioural effects. For example, several participants described hypervigilance as a learned strategy in response to ongoing prejudice:

*My dad was not accepting of me, I was homeless, I got kicked out, couch-surfing ... Going through that, you never look at life the same, whether that's [the] workplace [or otherwise]. You carry that forward, seeing that even one person will react that way. It's enough to make you think someone else will, and you don't want that experience ever again.*

*- Gay man working multiple jobs*

This participant indicated that the constant need to guard, conceal, and modify his identity in anticipation of others' reactions could be both tiresome and detrimental to his wellbeing. In his employment decisions, he described a higher degree of caution about certain fields or sectors and increased wariness about disclosing his identity to coworkers, with consequences related to pay, performance, and advancement. He also attributed his decision to work multiple part-time jobs to his former experiences with poverty and homelessness, seeking the security of multiple sources of income even at the expense of both wages and time.

Several others highlighted the role of early life course experiences in influencing employment inequities later on. One woman who worked as a lawyer described how her employment experience might have differed in the absence of the support she had from her family:

*If someone was kicked out really young because they were queer, they won't have the support I had from my parents [to attend grad school]. [If you don't have that], it becomes more difficult to find the type of job where you have benefits, disability, to have enough hours to qualify for employment insurance.*

*- White queer cis woman*

Experiences in education early in the life course played a role in shaping the employment outcomes of sexual and gender minority individuals. For example, identity-based bullying and social exclusion experienced in primary or secondary school were perceived by participants as contributing to poor educational performance. One man described the impact of attending a school that did not offer a safe and inclusive environment:

*I would always get Cs and Ds ... because I didn't want to be in class. When I came back to school, when I had dealt with my self-esteem and I was proud of who I am, I got on the honour roll ... And everyone was so surprised. And I was like, why are you so surprised? I knew I could always do it. I just didn't feel comfortable enough to achieve that potential, and it was the environment that they created.*

*- Transgender man working in youth services*

These types of experiences, combined with restricted social capital and resources, could limit options for postsecondary employment or education. A few participants suggested that LGBTQ2S+ individuals' capacity to afford, attend, and succeed in school safely and comfortably could have tangible effects on career options and outcomes:

*Post-secondary education is so important to the labour market, but what happens if you didn't feel comfortable going to university or college? What happens if you had a very difficult time graduating high school? What happens if you couldn't afford to access these services?*

*- Cisgender bisexual woman*

Given disruptions in school earlier in life, and/or seeking to mitigate other barriers, LGBTQ2S+ individuals could be more likely to return to or seek higher education in adulthood. However, this comes with employment-related costs, such as financial penalties or career interruptions.

In short, experiences that predate employment – including rejection, social exclusion, violence, poverty, precarity, and discrimination – can have a compounding effect, contributing to longer-term disparities for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. For the LGBTQ2S+ participants in our study, disadvantages accumulated across the life course, affecting confidence and self-esteem, income security, and career outlook more broadly.

*I think it's that build-up over time ... [It] impacts your ability to get raises, it impacts your ability to get promotions, it impacts your ability to do the things in order to get those two things: the wage increase and the promotion. You don't get the opportunities to grow.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in public sector*



## KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING EMPLOYMENT INEQUITIES

Having explored the employment experiences and trajectories of LGBTQ2S+ individuals, this section summarizes the factors participants identified as driving inequitable outcomes in employment. We employ the term *drivers* to refer to possible mechanisms underlying the various inequities in employment, which may or may not be causal in nature. *Inequities* refer to the differences in employment related outcomes of LGBTQ2S+ individuals compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers that are unfair and avoidable. Four overarching themes emerged as high-level drivers, which are discussed here: prejudice and discrimination; heteronormativity and cisnormativity; constrained choices; and repeated exposure to discrimination, prejudice and microaggressions.

Methodologically, we used a grounded theory approach to identify and synthesize drivers of inequities working from participants' own accounts of their employment journeys. We further refined the key themes by validating the findings with our focus group participants, probing in particular for any differences in drivers by intersecting characteristics, such as racial background or geography. Note that the drivers are not necessarily linked to any one specific outcome (e.g., lower wages), but rather can span several interconnected inequitable outcomes along participants' employment trajectories (e.g., hiring, remuneration, advancement). Where applicable, however, we highlight influences on specific outcomes if they were explicitly linked by the participants. The detailed methodology underlying the study is included in Appendix A.

### PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Prejudice and discrimination emerged as a driver of key employment inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals across industries and occupations, negatively influencing areas such as hiring, remuneration, retention and advancement.

Participants routinely described discriminatory systems and practices on the part of organizations, employers, clients, and coworkers that had a direct negative impact on their employment trajectories. They made explicit connections to larger, structural forces and societal beliefs – such as homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, racism, and sexism – that manifest in



practices and attitudes at different levels, shaping organizational practices and interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Participants often described examples of discriminatory actions as embedded within or trickling down from higher level systems. One participant introduced earlier on – who was misgendered by their line manager and colleagues for over a year – explained the systemic nature of their discriminatory experiences:

*The people I work with aren't bad people, they are certainly ignorant in some really important things, but I really hesitate to focus on individual actions here because it's very much systemic. The [institution] itself is super queerphobic, and ... you can just see it trickle down ... Those in power are resistant to [change because of] white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy ... It is this big systems thing, but it trickles down into actions.*

*- White genderqueer and transmasculine participant*

Earlier sections of this report described how experiences of prejudice and discrimination negatively impacted LGBTQ2S+ people's careers and overall economic well-being over time. Participants described such experiences as the reasons they were struggling to both obtain and retain employment, leading to job precarity and income insecurity. Some participants experienced bias as a result of discrimination on the part of employers, whom they felt could have been taking advantage of the precarity many LGBTQ2S+ people find themselves in when it comes to employment: *"Hiring managers consciously or unconsciously know that we are in a more vulnerable position than our cisgender heterosexual counterparts so they take advantage of that, and don't pay us as much as we deserve to be paid"* (Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian).

Although we heard of many such experiences, LGBTQ2S+ people described it being very difficult to demonstrate that they had been discriminated against (in a dismissal or lost job opportunity) on the basis of gender or sexual identity. For those experiencing discrimination within a workplace, reporting these instances to management in some cases compounded their negative experiences.

Leaving jobs, and in some cases, industries, due to discriminatory treatment was as a common experience. Participants weighed decisions about their employment in terms of their mental health, employment instabilities, and the impact on their incomes and careers. For many participants, there was no decision to make – employment in certain industries or workplaces was simply untenable, as highlighted in the case vignette below.

### Case vignette 5: Discrimination driving job departure

A gay man who worked in aviation recounted regularly facing homophobic slurs in the workplace. He described the aviation industry as “a male-dominated, alpha male environment.” His work became increasingly untenable when a colleague refused to fly with him because of his sexual orientation and put in a request for a schedule change, something that was ultimately approved by the employer. Here is how he described these experiences contributing to mental health challenges and absenteeism on the job:

*“Showing up to work, being discriminated against, having people judge you nonstop based on who you are, walking through the airport and seeing people point at you and talk about you. The baggage on your mental health, knowing that was affecting my ability to make money. I didn’t want to go to work, I would call in sick, because I didn’t want to fly with that pilot. Especially getting paired with someone for 4-7 days.”*

The participant ultimately left the aviation industry. He went back to school, worked multiple jobs, and eventually started a job working in a post-secondary institution. He shared his experience changing industries – moving from a higher paying but discriminatory job, to a lower paying but more supportive work environment, and how that led to positive mental health changes.

However, this change was not without consequences. This participant explained that changing industries had a negative impact on his income. He linked this difference in compensation to gender-based pay gaps, with male-dominated careers generally being well-paying, and fields occupied by more women being compensated less. At the time he left the aviation field, he reported interviewing for positions with a salary of above \$50,000/year, while his starting salary at his current non-profit position was \$28,000/year. At the time we spoke with him, he had taken on additional jobs in order to earn a livable income.

## HETERONORMATIVITY AND CISNORMATIVITY

Participants from varied backgrounds and industries asserted that workplaces underpinned by heteronormativity and cisnormativity remained the status quo, such that LGBTQ2S+ people’s lives and identities were seen as inappropriate for or incompatible with workplace expectations. Specifically, overwhelmingly cisheteronormative environments can lead employers to marginalize LGBTQ2S+ employees intentionally or unintentionally through the concept of “job fit.” Being out at work carried a high risk of being perceived and described as having “poor fit” within a position or an organization. In turn, “poor fit” had negative impacts in key areas of social and professional networks and training and advancement opportunities, sometimes resulting in LGBTQ2S+ individuals leaving their positions.

This report describes the ways in which disclosing one's identity exposes LGBTQ2S+ individuals to negative treatment, both in the moment and over time. Importantly, disclosure takes place in everyday interactions, such as having "water cooler" conversations about weekend plans or one's partner. However, in the context of cis-heteronormativity, interactions that are usually commonplace and acceptable operate as disclosure events for LGBTQ2S+ employees, and these are sometimes viewed as inappropriate or unprofessional.

*Maybe you have queer hires who are not out at work because it is not seen as professional or appropriate at work. You don't post pictures of your partner whereas straight people do it all the time. You put out a pride flag, you get in trouble.*

*- White genderqueer teacher*

Participants described being perceived or branded as the one who does not "fit" in a professional sense as a result of their disclosures. The obvious inequity is that LGBTQ2S+ employees have to explain and defend who they are in everyday conversations with colleagues and supervisors, while non-LGBTQ2S+ employees do not. In turn, the inequity leads to self-monitoring and concealment. Navigating everyday workplace conversations is made challenging and taxing. Employees have to deliberate over degrees of disclosure, as well as ability to relate and maintain interpersonal relationships with colleagues.

Perceptions of poor fit can arise also in situations where non-LGBTQ2S+ colleagues hold prejudiced, often sexualized, perceptions of the lives of LGBTQ2S+ individuals, often in contrast to the reality of their own lived experiences. Participants described difficulties "*being yourself and having social connections,*" a growing sense of isolation in the workplace, and experiences of outright exclusion in social and professional contexts.

Participants considered level of "outness" in the workplace as limiting opportunities for training and advancement. Many LGBTQ2S+ employees felt compelled to closely manage and monitor their disclosure in relationship the cisheteronormative expectations at work. Lack of fairness in training and advancement opportunities led to inequities in economic advancement, reinforcing the situation several LGBTQ2S+ employees faced, being stuck in the same, lower paid positions:

*I think it's the lack of opportunity. Because when you give people the opportunity and they prove themselves, you just have to recognize their talents and what they contribute, it increases someone's chances of getting promoted into higher places. When you don't have the opportunity to prove yourself, there is no way you can. You'll always be struggling.*

*- Bisexual Black architect*

Importantly, there was a sense among participants that microaggressions and other forms of social and professional exclusion were in fact covert tactics deployed to yield further proof of LGBTQ2S+ employees' poor fit, further perpetuating marginalization.

*Let's say you're going for an employment opportunity, and you don't get that opportunity. No one's going to say, 'oh, it's because you're gay.' They're going to find every other reason under the sun to say, 'oh well, we chose someone else because they just fit the position better,' or this or that.*

*- Bisexual cis woman*

Such sentiments were commonly voiced by participants. They recounted patterns of practice and behaviour on the part of organizations, employers, and coworkers that signaled to LGBTQ2S+ employees that they were not welcome in their workplaces. In turn, this increased the perceptions (and likely reality) that they had limited if any chances at advancement, leading to further inequities as they ultimately chose to depart from, or were pushed out of, their positions.

## CONSTRAINED CHOICES

LGBTQ2S+ people from diverse backgrounds, industries, and regions widely expressed that their sense of choice was constrained when it came to making and pursuing employment-related decisions. Educational barriers, economic precarity, and in particular, the absence of safe and inclusive job opportunities substantially limited their options as jobseekers or employees, resulting in wage inequities, job insecurity, and reduced job mobility. Importantly, other factors (e.g., discrimination) often contributed to this, pointing to the interconnected, multi-level, and systemic nature of the drivers of inequitable employment outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals.

### Problematizing “choice”

Labour market studies frequently reference the concept of *industry or occupational sorting*. This refers to the way in which different population groups are over- or under-represented in certain industries or occupations. For example, earlier phases of this project found that 28.3 per cent of heterosexual men in Canada are employed in manufacturing while this proportion is significantly lower for gay and bisexual men.<sup>51</sup>

Using this example, it might seem straightforward to assume that gay men and bisexual men are simply *choosing* not to work in secondary industries, when in fact they may not be in control of that decision (e.g., they may be discriminated against in terms of hiring or acceptance into the required education programs), or they may be making their choices on the basis of inequities in expected compensation, advancement, and safety, due to factors outside their control.

## Trade-offs in decisions to leave a job, sector, or industry

For many LGBTQ2S+ individuals we spoke with, experiences of identity-based harassment, prejudice, and discrimination resulted in them leaving jobs. In other words, unsafe or toxic work environments directly resulted in job instability: *“When I decided to tell [my coworkers] and came out as gay, they started showing attitudes towards me, it was very toxic. That’s when I started looking for a new job”* (gay, African American immigrant). Experiences of homo/bi/transphobia and other forms of discrimination resulted in some participants not only leaving their jobs, but relocating cities, with negative effects of their wages and careers:

*It was hard to live in that city as a gay and racialized person, so I moved to [another city]. This is something I regret ... I had a great career [there]. I had that great Asian, gay boss, although he was not out, even though I knew it. I thought, ‘if my boss is not out, that’s the signal, maybe, that this is not the city and employer for me’ .... Gay men are actually racist in [the first city]. You always felt like racist things could happen, and they did happen ... These types of experiences drove me away. My work was good, but seeing my boss wasn’t out, it affected me. That’s why I made the decision to move, to take a pay cut, because I just couldn’t stand or walk anymore. [The city] didn’t feel safe. It didn’t feel like an employer that could be safe ... This did impact my career and my life choices.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

Participants described feeling forced into leaving jobs in order to preserve both their safety and mental well-being. However, these departures negatively affected career trajectories as well as wages, as illustrated in the above quote.

In some cases, participants’ choices to leave unsafe or unsupportive work environments was constrained. Economic insecurity led some to remain in a negative work environment, particularly if they were concerned about their ability to find another job. Others felt unable to give up key benefits. For instance, one transgender woman described staying in her position at least partly because of her health coverage, including gender-affirming hormone therapy, among other advantages: *“That’s one of the things that I feel keeps me in my current workplace, is access to ongoing medication and those benefits, the flexibility, and the work-life balance that I really need”* (white lesbian transgender woman). However, for many participants, to continue in jobs that lacked safety and inclusion threatened their mental health.

## Trade-offs in job-seeking

Participants’ decisions to pursue a specific job or industry were influenced by a range of considerations. They described self-selecting into or out of certain sectors in order to pursue safety and avoid discrimination; in several cases, participants avoided jobs similar to those

where they had prior negative experiences. Some individuals sought jobs where they felt they could make an impact, for instance within an LGBTQ2S+-serving organization.

The factors shaping LGBTQ2S+ jobseekers' decisions led to fewer options – including avoiding certain sectors entirely – and lower pay. One man who left the aviation industry avoided male-dominated sectors he had experienced as unsafe, and suffered a substantial pay cut as a result:

*A lot of those male-dominated areas [are] well-paying: trades, apprenticeships, anything of that nature. And then you look at it - 'okay, so if I don't want to work there, what am I left with?' ... I instantly knew I was setting myself back going for charity, non-profit work ... Generally, the jobs I found myself pursuing were lower-paying.*

*- Gay man working multiple jobs*

In this example, male-dominated workplaces were perceived to create negative employment experiences for LGBTQ2S+ employees. However, female-dominated workplaces were associated with lower pay, attributed in part to the same drivers. One individual pointed to LGBTQ2S+ jobseekers sorting themselves out of male-dominated jobs and into those in the non-profit sector, with a commensurate wage penalty:

*Are you someone who feels comfortable in tech fields, in STEM fields, predominantly male spaces? Are you someone leaning towards the non-profit sector and providing on-the-ground supports, because that's where your activism lies? ... When you look at the non-profit industry, where employees are making not as high of wages, who are the people working there?*

*- Cisgender bisexual woman*

The complex and constrained nature of job decisions meant that LGBTQ2S+ individuals often needed to put more time and energy than other jobseekers into looking for jobs that met multiple criteria, including a safe and welcoming environment, a competitive salary and benefits, and so on. Describing their employment search, one participant noted that “*the most difficult part is probably looking for a particular workplace that is inclusive*” (queer, pansexual and polyamorous participant). This points to LGBTQ2S+ individuals expending more effort during the job search and applying to fewer positions, potentially exacerbating other inequities related to race, ability, and socioeconomic status, among others.



## Salary vs. safety: a worthwhile trade-off?

Several participants grappled with the question of trading off safety, security, and inclusion at work for higher wages, with many having left a better-paying job for a more supportive work environment:

*"I'm in this position now because I feel safe, and I did accept quite a cut in pay ... I appreciate the safety of the workplace that a unionized position comes with ... You're protected, you have very good benefits ... You just try and make the workplace as good as you can"* (white lesbian transgender woman).

Some questioned the notion that LGBTQ2S+ individuals should be faced with a choice between safety and adequate wages: *"I'm pretty firm on not taking lower pay ... I think it's not okay that we're expected to make these choices for our own safety when it's not even our fault that we're feeling unsafe"* (bisexual Black architect).

## Trade-offs in seeking advancement

A small number of participants felt like they were unable to advance safely in their careers and avoided applying for more prominent positions. In this example of constrained decision-making, the benefits of promotion were weighed against the advantages of privacy:

*If you're getting promoted and your position is increasing, you're going to be more and more visible, and some people aren't as comfortable with that. Not everyone wants to be in the centre of attention... Sometimes when you're in a higher position, it's not all professional – people are going to question you more in general.*

*- Queer, pansexual and polyamorous participant*

This participant associated advancement with risks to safety and privacy, alluding to a glass ceiling for LGBTQ2S+ employees, self-imposed as a reaction to discrimination. A related yet distinct trend was a perception that moving up in a company would restrict their capacity to be open and authentic at work. One gay man pointed to more rigid expectations of privacy and professionalism that often accompany leadership roles, noting that he had *"never worked around a senior leader at that level who was open [as LGBTQ2S+]"* (white gay man in the public service). In this way, concerns about safety, privacy, and one's ability to live openly may inform how LGBTQ2S+ employees go about pursuing promotional opportunities, potentially restraining their career progression.

## REPEATED EXPOSURE TO DISCRIMINATION, PREJUDICE, AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

Participants described witnessing and experiencing prejudice, microaggressions, and discrimination in the labour market. Over time, observing, encountering, and navigating these situations had a cumulative effect, with negative implications for individuals' mental health.

*Work isn't just somewhere that you go, and you do your thing, and you come home, and it's completely disconnected. We spend most of our time at work, we spend most of our time with our colleagues, so of course that's going to play a really important role in your life.*

- Bisexual cis woman

In recounting discrimination and prejudice along their employment journeys, participants detailed the toll these cumulative experiences took on their levels of stress, anxiety, and on their health and well-being. In some cases, these experiences had tangible effects on workplace performance and confidence, with consequences for outcomes like pay and advancement.

### Guarding, concealing, and coding

Guarding, concealing and coding<sup>e</sup> were identified as tactics to avoid and respond to negative treatment based on gender and sexual identity. Participants described coding their language, avoiding sharing certain parts of their lives, or concealing their LGBTQ2S+ identity entirely:

*I make myself a blank slate, and I don't add anything that could make someone that isn't as open or liberal feel threatened. I'll tone down the feminism ... and tone down any indication of being queer. That's where being married to a man is helpful: if I feel threatened ... or someone is maybe homophobic or someone likes to make jokes about queer people or thinks that women who like women are really hot and funny, ... I get just ignore all of that by erasing the fact that I am queer, and rely on the fact that I am married to a man.*

- White queer cis woman

Censoring and “toning down” certain aspects of oneself to support passing was a common protective measure. Plurisexual women and femme participants felt especially compelled to conceal their identities to protect themselves from unwanted advances in unsafe and sexualized workplaces. By **plurisexual** we refer to the sexual orientation of those who experience attraction

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<sup>e</sup> Coding refers to sociolinguistic code-switching, where individuals use “different dialects, accents, language combinations, and mannerisms within social groups in order to project a particular identity.”<sup>52</sup> In this case, it refers to the ways in which participants described choosing to project, or to conceal, their LGBTQ2S+ identities.

to more than one gender (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, etc.). Reflecting on a former workplace where “*getting hit on or flirted with was very common, and not addressed properly,*” one individual noted that they were “*definitely very closeted*” in that job “*because it was so gross*” (pansexual woman of colour).

Participants often navigated these experiences alone, since the unsafe work environments in which they found themselves had limited options for recourse. LGBTQ2S+ employees may be particularly concerned about the repercussions of bringing issues forward:

*When you're in that situation and you're LGBT you're like, 'well of course if I speak up, it's going to be about me.' ... You spend so much time trying to hide aspects of you that are not conforming to everything that's around you, that you don't want to do anything that brings an intense spotlight to that.*

*- White gay man in the public service*

Employees may be especially hesitant to bring microaggressions or less overt forms of negative treatment forward, out of a fear that employers will not take these actions as seriously or perceive complainant as overreacting. The result, often, is that LGBTQ2S+ individuals are forced to endure ongoing stress. As the participant quoted above shared, “*I dealt with it by internalizing it, by not telling anyone, by feeling miserable*” (white gay man in the public service).

The need to navigate the prejudicial and discriminatory experiences described in this report can take a substantial toll on one’s mental health and well-being. Participants described a constant sense of anxiety regarding how, when, and to whom to disclose. Additionally, there was a sense of exhaustion associated with the ongoing need to code or censor oneself. One transgender man said: “*You kind of build up a thick skin and go at it, and some days I'm just like, 'no, I'm staying in my bed. I'm too tired to do this right now.'*” Finally, having to engage or collaborate with inappropriate or offensive coworkers was characterized as emotionally and mentally draining. In enduring these interactions, LGBTQ2S+ individuals’ sense of worth and self-esteem may be threatened. One participant spoke to this in detail, reflecting on a previous employment:

*It wore me down. I am starting to look at myself, 'I am not really that worth it, I can't help the organization.' ... Your workplace takes a toll on your health, physical and your spiritual health, because when you go to your place of work and people look down on you and discriminate [against] you ... At the end of the day you tend to come back home a little bit depressed, and probably thinking you are not good enough. All these parameters, at the end of the day, they really shape you.*

*- Gay, African American immigrant*

## Consequences for performance and confidence

Negative impacts on mental health resulting from ongoing and repeated exposure to prejudice, discrimination, and microaggressions could have considerable repercussions for participants' workplace performance as well as their overall confidence. They described struggling with workplace attendance, their capacity to work effectively with certain colleagues, and productivity: *"If your mental health is taking a toll, if you don't feel safe, you're almost certainly not going to be as productive as when you feel safe in an environment"* (cisgender bisexual woman).

Speaking about the impacts of prejudice and discrimination in hiring and promotion on LGBTQ2S+ people's confidence when applying to other jobs, a bisexual cis woman observed, *"This brings up questions of like, oh, am I just not smart enough? Am I not qualified? You start to question your own value, your own worth, your own abilities"* (bisexual cis woman).

A loss of confidence and ability to be productive at work was often further exacerbated by a sense of isolation. One participant described the mental health toll of persistent encounters with cisheteronormative structures and the feeling of not belonging: *"You're reminded that other people see you as worthless. It never goes away. It destroys the social interaction that should exist in the workplace. You can no longer be effective as a worker"* (gay man of Black/African descent). Another participant conveyed the mutually reinforcing relationship between mental health, workplace performance, and various employment outcomes:

*Every once in a while, attendance takes a hit. You're not always able to attend because you do have that baggage ... [Once, when a customer called me a homophobic slur], I had to call my boss and be like, 'I'm not mentally here anymore, can I close the store now? I just can't.' I think how the outside world perceives you and verbalizes that to you will affect you in terms of what you're able to do performance-wise.*

*If your mental health is suffering, you're not going to perform well on anything else you do. It has effects on the economic side: inability to get a promotion, etc. It's a nonstop, cyclical cycle. There are so many barriers to just being your own self that just continue to set you further back, without even actively realizing that that may be what is happening sometimes.*

*- Gay man working multiple jobs*



## CONTRIBUTORS TO POSITIVE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

LGBTQ2S+ participants in the study have described many different negative or inequitable workplace experiences and outcomes. Despite this, several participants described jobs they found to be inclusive, positive, and affirming. They detailed positive experiences which they attributed to a variety of factors, pointing to potential solutions. Without minimizing the challenges that exist, this section reports on contributors to positive experiences for LGBTQ2S+ individuals that are specific to the workplace. By contributors we mean any factors at individual, organizational, or policy levels that were either experienced by participants firsthand or shared as suggestions and hypothesized to lead to positive outcomes. As such, the findings in this section are offered as participant-proposed solutions rather than formal recommendations, presented here with a view to informing policy and program interventions that are evidence-informed, inclusive, equitable, and effective for this population.

Of note, many participants described feeling personally responsible for creating their own positive experiences in the face of persistent and systemic barriers. Several also framed positive workplaces as the absence of negative encounters. As one individual noted, *“I have my bar so low, even if they treat me neutrally, I consider that a positive thing”* (Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian). Ultimately, it is governments, organizations, and other higher level employment actors who are responsible for effecting systemic changes. This section intentionally prioritizes actions that can be taken by stakeholders other than LGBTQ2S+ individuals themselves.

The graphic below depicts different components of what makes for a good work experience for LGBTQ2S+ individuals, as shared by the participants in this study. These components emerged as key themes in interviews and focus groups and are not meant to be prescriptive or an exhaustive list; rather, they add to and inform other findings in this area. We present these with the acknowledgement that good workplace experiences – as well as contributors thereof – may differ among the diverse individuals who comprise the LGBTQ2S+ community, including those whose employment experiences are simultaneously shaped by other social locations.

## What makes a good workplace experience?



## PEOPLE POWER: INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, COMMITTED ALLIES, AND THE LGBTQ2S+ COMMUNITY AT WORK

Participants highlighted the role that coworkers could play in contributing to positive employment experiences and outcomes. To begin this section, we explore three main themes that emerged in the study: inclusive leadership, supportive and allied colleagues, and LGBTQ2S+ community in the workplace.

### Inclusive leadership

Participants described directors, supervisors, and managers who were explicitly and genuinely committed to LGBTQ2S+ equity as essential to fostering safer and more inclusive workplace environments – as well as improved outcomes – for gender and sexual minority employees.



Some participants described inclusive leadership as a protective factor against experiences of discrimination on the job. For instance, one participant described feeling confident in his employer's commitment to defending him, which allowed him to be more open and authentic in the workplace: *"Knowing that the organization had my back, I didn't care if I was openly gay"* (queer, South Asian man). Another person built on this in the context of out LGBTQ2S+ leaders, referencing how a transgender boss speaking openly about her identity in meetings led him to believe that he would be able to call out discrimination should it occur.

The distinct role of company or organizational leadership in managing cases of harassment or discrimination was also frequently mentioned, including the value of leaders who were willing to "walk the talk" in support of their LGBTQ2S+ employees. As one participant put it, *"if there are others who make comments, I will need you to support me. It's not just about a statement of inclusion: are you actually going to do anything about it?"* (white genderqueer teacher).

However, the role of leadership went beyond protection from discrimination. In more hierarchical workplaces, the power derived from seniority can also mean that those in leadership may be the best-positioned to bring about organizational-level change. For example, one individual described a manager who registered her workplace for their community's Pride parade, despite resistance from other leaders within the organization. The participant felt like this led to meaningful changes in work culture, including a colleague coming out to other coworkers for the first time. Yet others reported positive effects on promotions and wages, sharing experiences with supportive managers who championed opportunities for their LGBTQ2S+ employees. One queer, non-binary participant discovered that they were earning less than colleagues in the same position, and shared this with their supervisor:

*I did find out when I was hired that I was getting paid \$10,000 less a year than [others in this position], which I thought was kind of weird, but I was also brand new. Then I was like, 'you know, what? I'm doing the same amount of work!' I talked to my supervisor and I said, 'someone told me that the other directors get at least \$10,000 more a year, is that weird?' She was like, 'that's pretty weird.' My supervisor wrote an email to back me up and be like, 'yep, [this person is] amazing, their stuff's awesome.' And [management] were like, 'yeah, okay, here's an extra \$10,000.'*

*- Non-binary, bisexual animation director*

In this scenario, the supervisor offered tangible support in not only affirming the unfairness of the situation, but in advocating for a pay raise and did so at the participant's request and with their guidance.

Many participants perceived greater diversity among upper management as indicative of both a safer workplace and a more inclusive approach to leadership. They described employers who were women, LGBTQ2S+, and/or racialized as those who tended to be more committed to

inclusion. Some attributed this to shared experiences, suggesting that among leaders who have also experienced marginalization, “*you see the transition from the business-first aspect to more of that equity-seeking perspective, because they’ve been through those struggles*” (gay man working multiple jobs). Having out LGBTQ2S+ leaders signalled to participants that they not only belonged, but that opportunities for advancement were genuinely open to them. A bisexual woman pursuing academia described one poignant experience with a professor: “*That was the first time I had heard another adult – someone I look up to – openly identify as bisexual. It shook my world, in a very positive way.*” Others shared similar experiences, underscoring the power of out LGBTQ2S+ role models in their workplaces or fields. While representation has its limits and risks (e.g., tokenism), the role of diversity in leadership nonetheless emerged as a key theme. As one participant shared, “*I want to see more queer people in leadership positions. When I see that, I know I’m in good hands*” (pansexual woman of Jamaican descent).

Altogether, this points to inclusive, supportive, and diverse leadership as one potential contributor to positive employment experiences and outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Participants identified several solutions in pursuit of this aim, including providing training for organizational leaders, hiring for diversity at all levels of leadership, and exploring implementation of quotas in decision-making roles. Leveraging actors who might be able to influence change at the leadership level was also raised. Such actors include unions and **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)**, that is, groups within organizations, typically based on a shared characteristic or life experience, that aim to provide support to members, enhancing professional and career development, and enhancing organizational capacity on relevant issues.

## Supportive and allied colleagues

Many participants spoke to the positive effects of working with non-LGBTQ2S+ colleagues who were open-minded, affirming, and willing to step into an allyship role. In some cases, a willingness to learn from and respectfully engage with LGBTQ2S+ coworkers about unfamiliar topics was described as impactful in and of itself: some saw these interactions as helping to foster connections and build understanding on teams. One woman, speaking about her first day at a former job, described this memory as among her most positive employment experiences:

*The very first team meeting I went to, ... we were all introducing ourselves, and one of the people said, ‘did you want to introduce yourself?’ ... And after I was finished, this same social worker said ... ‘I’ve never worked with anyone who was an out lesbian, and I’m wondering, is it okay to ask you questions?’ ... I thought, this is it – this is exactly it. Ask questions! I’m going to be far less upset if you ask me an inappropriate question than if you call me into your office and say listen, ‘don’t talk about your life outside of here.’ It was an open atmosphere of really wanting to learn.*

*- Two-Sprit lesbian social worker*

It is important to recognize that some participants criticized the expectation that LGBTQ2S+ employees engage in educating colleagues, given these tasks take time and constitute emotional labour. Others emphasized they would prefer not to discuss or explain their personal lives, even when queries may be well-intentioned. While some described the opportunity to educate their colleagues as affirming and empowering, others found it exhausting and frustrating.

Some participants spoke of other ways colleagues had shaped their employment experiences for the better, by offering genuine praise or recognition for their work, providing emotional support in the face of challenging personal circumstances (e.g., familial rejection), and acting as champions for them in the workplace. Many pointed to the tangible outcomes that can result from working with affirming and inclusive colleagues, such as improved social connections, an increased sense of safety, and opportunities for progression or advancement that may not have otherwise existed. For instance, one individual recalled a mentor who regularly vouched for the quality of their work to senior management, resulting in access to roles with greater responsibility within the company.

Several ideas were raised in conversations with respect to building awareness and allyship among non-LGBTQ2S+ employees. In a few cases, participants described employers who assessed candidates' competencies related to diversity during the hiring process, with a view to recruiting candidates who were more likely to contribute to a safe and inclusive workplace. One woman offered further details about this process at her company:

*In the hiring process, they spend about 15 or so minutes talking about what your practice of allyship is, and how you go about that in your personal life ... If they don't see certain benchmarks that you're working towards, I know that it actually disqualifies someone from being hired.*

*- Bisexual white woman*

In this case, the employer not only asked these questions as part of the interview process, but had actually made hiring decisions on the basis of a candidate's answer. Other recommended approaches included training for staff and during onboarding, and identifying ways in which staff can signal general allyship and inclusivity, beyond supporting individual out-LGBTQ2S+ colleagues. This latter point is worth emphasizing, given that the positive effects of having supportive colleagues relied on LGBTQ2S+ participants knowing these colleagues could be trusted. This highlights the importance of non-LGBTQ2S+ employees being open and explicit about their commitment to LGBTQ2S+ inclusion; passive acceptance alone is insufficient.

## Allyship in action

Allyship to the LGBTQ2S+ community involves a few key characteristics:

1. Allies are **concerned about the well-being** of LGBTQ2S+ individuals, even though they are not part of the community themselves.
2. The practice of allyship involves **actively confronting** heterosexism, anti-LGBTQ2S+ bias and discrimination, and heterosexual/cisgender privilege – both in themselves and others.
3. Allies understand homo/bi/transphobia as **social justice issues**.
4. To be an ally is not an identity – **allyship is an action**.<sup>53</sup>

In the workplace, LGBTQ2S+ allyship can be practiced in many ways, including correcting someone who misgenders a coworker in their absence, or stepping up to support education or advocacy initiatives that regularly fall on LGBTQ2S+ colleagues. The following anecdotes were shared by participants, who described them as powerful instances of allyship on the part of their coworkers.

"I showed up at a gym one day early in my transition and said, 'I'd like to rent a locker.' [The employee] said, 'oh, let me see if I can find a guy to show you to the men's locker room.' And I just kind of froze. In that example, I didn't really feel like educating them. I just kind of walked off and found an ally in the office. I came back with her, and she said, 'my colleague would love to see the women's locker room. Do you mind if I take her through there and give her a tour?'" (white lesbian transgender woman).



"An individual in a directorial position in my organization is one of the best allies I have ever encountered. We've been developing training for the organization as part of the EDI committee. When we do these trainings, a lot of the people we get are the exact same people who don't really need to be there, because they're already on board with the concepts. He uses his power as a director to insert [the training] in everyone's calendar and make them think it's mandatory. He's a very firm believer in using his privilege as both a man in power and as a director of our organization. It really does take the onus off a lot of members of our EDI committee, many of whom are members of marginalized groups. We're doing a lot of the behind-the-scenes work. There's a lot of emotional labour, but for us it's really gratifying to have a cis, white, well-educated man in a position of power who then says, 'I am going to do the public facing work for you guys because I know it is hard for you.' It has been really encouraging to have that in the workplace" (queer, biromantic, asexual participant).

## LGBTQ2S+ community in the workplace

Several participants spoke positively about experiences in employment where they worked alongside other LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Particularly for those who were young or at an early stage in their careers, working with colleagues who were openly LGBTQ2S+ supported them to feel comfortable and safe disclosing their own identity: *“When I was interning, there was someone that was coaching me, and she was super, super out. That definitely made me feel like I could be super, super out, and she was super well-respected ... Having others be out helped me feel like I could be too”* (non-binary, bisexual animation director). Working with LGBTQ2S+ individuals helped participants feel safer coming out, while also reducing the perceived need or pressure to disclose. Participants recalled jobs where they had worked with a high proportion of LGBTQ2S+ coworkers and never needed to come out, describing these experiences as both rare and refreshing. This helped normalize greater gender and sexual diversity in the workplace.

Some participants recalled their first time working with other out LGBTQ2S+ individuals as especially impactful. In addition to feeling greater kinship or connection with these colleagues, the value of accessing queer community in the workplace early on in one’s career emerged in several discussions. For instance, one woman reflected on her current job, where the majority of her coworkers are openly LGBTQ2S+, and how this led to enhanced access to mentors within her chosen career:

*This is my first experience being in this type of context where it is so open, and it goes beyond accepting ... This is the first time that I’ve actually worked with other people who identify as bisexual who are doing a job that I envisioned myself wanting to do, and who I can look to as mentors. That’s been super positive. I can’t even begin to put into words how much it’s really had a positive impact on me, not only within my employment, but also within my own personhood, within my own journey of trying to explore my own sexuality, because it is pretty challenging being bisexual.*

- Bisexual cis woman

This anecdote is a reminder of the high level of diversity within the LGBTQ2S+ community, and the distinct value of developing relationships with colleagues with specific shared experiences – in this case, bisexuality. In another case, a young participant framed working with predominantly-LGBTQ2S+ individuals as making a certain career path appear more viable:

*It’s good to be just around queer people all the time ... I think that really boosted my confidence to continue working in the sector. If I didn’t have that, I definitely feel like I’d be a little more ostracized and would stay away from these positions.*

- Pansexual woman of Jamaican descent

Participants identified additional workplace benefits of having LGBTQ2S+ coworkers, including a reduced burden to educate colleagues or explain one's identity, improved interpersonal relationships, and the perceived ability to be more open or forthcoming. Many felt less compelled to code their language or conceal certain aspects of their lives when in the presence of other LGBTQ2S+ colleagues. For some, queer and transgender coworkers were natural collaborators in pursuit of a more inclusive workplace. One participant described inquiring about an organization's work culture with a current trans employee prior to applying: "I did ask her a lot of things, and ... she was like, 'we'll bond together, and we'll try to make it a more trans-inclusive space'" (transmasculine non-binary participant). More broadly, participants reported that a higher proportion of LGBTQ2S+ employees in a workplace contributed to a more inclusive, relationship-focused, and progressive organizational culture.

In general, participants pointed to more diverse workplaces as contributing to positive employment experiences. This was especially the case for racialized participants, who underscored the safety, affirmation, and mutual understanding that can come from working with other Black, Indigenous, and people of colour. One participant articulated this:

*What's helped me is having just one person on my current team that understands [...] She is racialized [too]. We talk about the need for diversity, the need for diverse voices. For me, it's having openness to the bullshit. And just having someone there being like, 'I saw what happened, and that was messed up.' None of us had power. But we had each other. And we were able to protect each other.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

While a few participants had the unique experience working in jobs where nearly all staff identified as sexual and gender minorities, being "the only one" of a particular gender, sexual orientation, race, and so forth, often led to isolation and pressure. Our findings suggest that even a few LGBTQ2S+ coworkers can positively impact LGBTQ2S+ employees' sense of comfort, inclusion, and belonging. Participants pointed to a few approaches that may help facilitate this, including targeted hiring of LGBTQ2S+ staff, development of ERGs, and opportunities for company- or sector-based peer support or networking.

## QUEERING THE WORKPLACE: LGBTQ2S+-SPECIFIC PRACTICES, PROGRAMS, OR POLICIES

Participants discussed a wide range of practices, programs, or policies that they perceived to support better employment experiences or outcomes. In this section, we focus on actions and approaches targeted specifically to LGBTQ2S+ employees. This included tailored benefits, training and capacity-building, and fostering community in the workplace.

## LGBTQ2S+-inclusive policies and benefits

The need for workplace policies and benefits to be designed explicitly with LGBTQ2S+ employees in mind frequently came up in interviews and focus groups. Several participants advocated for these practices and highlighted the importance of consulting with LGBTQ2S+ staff on benefit packages. As one person emphasized, “*we should be able to co-create our workplaces*” (Black, agender and queer participant).

Many participants had experiences with benefit packages that failed to account for distinct circumstances, experiences, or challenges faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals, and pointed to changes that could make these policies more inclusive. Examples included coverage for gender-affirming medical procedures, financial support for in vitro fertilization and surrogacy, commensurate parental leave, and extended mental health benefits. Participants described how they bore high personal costs when benefits that address and reflect LGBTQ2S+ needs were absent – the extra financial cost is of note given the aforementioned wage gaps. They perceived these programs to disproportionately benefit their cisgender, heterosexual colleagues. Speaking to the value of enhanced mental health support provided by employers, one participant framed targeted employee benefits as far more meaningful than general statements of inclusion:

*I think the policies that are most important aren't [an employer's] policy on anti-racism or their policy on being woman-friendly. If you want to be queer-friendly, it's about laying it [out] in your policies. The Employee Assistance Program, when it comes to mental health support, that's not going to help me. What you should do is say, 'we're going to expand our mental health options through your insurance, so that if you need to get a specialized queer, racialized therapist, you can apply for it.' That, to me, is queer-friendly.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

Benefits that reflect the needs of LGBTQ2S+ employees served to enhance both workplace experiences and broader life outcomes, such as health. Participants with extended benefits noticed the change that occurred in their health and well-being with increased access to services. Some signaled how making benefits information more readily available for prospective employees would help to equip LGBTQ2S+ individuals with the necessary knowledge to inform their employment decisions.

## Gender inclusion and respect for gender diversity

Gender inclusion and respect for gender diversity emerged as a strong theme, with simple yet powerful actions by employers and colleagues noted as ways to foster a respectful and affirming workplace. While gender inclusion was framed as especially important for trans and non-binary



individuals, cisgender participants highlighted its importance as well: when employers were explicit in their support for gender minority employees, sexual minorities felt more included too.

In particular, participants described as essential the appropriate use and normalization of pronouns in the workplace. Practices such as openly sharing pronouns (e.g., on company websites, Zoom titles, email signatures, or name tags), regularly incorporating them into meeting introductions, and respecting colleagues' pronouns (including in their absence) were seen as an important step toward gender inclusivity. Participants believed that organizations and colleagues taking these steps – especially those who are cisgender and/or in leadership roles – was a small but effective way to communicate acceptance and support for gender diversity.

Beyond demonstrating acceptance, these practices can create space for individuals to express and explore their identity. One participant recalled her employer's explicit support for pronoun-sharing, and feeling comfortable to explore their own gender expression as a result:

*We were handing out pronoun pins and resources, and then our manager was like 'hey, why don't you guys also grab some if you want?' it felt really great. I used she/her [pronouns] for the longest time, and then I remember being like, 'oh, this is a very open group, I can grab a different thing and say I want to use she/they' ... It seems like a trivial thing, but it's not at all.*

*- Queer, pansexual and polyamorous participant*

Participants also discussed other practices that could facilitate more gender inclusive workplaces, including the use of gender-neutral language on forms or documents, supporting the use of preferred or chosen names, the availability of inclusive/non-gendered physical environments at work (e.g., washrooms, change rooms), and ensuring smooth and unobtrusive processes for gender or name changes among employees (e.g., staff pages on websites, email addresses, etc.).

## Workplace education and training

Many participants characterized workplace training on LGBTQ2S+ competency and inclusion as a valuable approach when incorporated within a broader organizational strategy. Given the noted gaps in understanding of LGBTQ2S+ issues among colleagues, some offered informal education in the absence of structured training. Other training topics identified included intersectionality, anti-oppression, cultural competency, anti-racism, immigrant rights, and disability justice. A few participants shared stories of how their own participation in such training helped them understand their own experiences and identities. They suggested the potential for training to be offered by other employment actors such as professional associations.

While training was considered necessary, however, many emphasized that it would not be sufficient. For example, workplace training may be less well-suited to address deeply entrenched

beliefs. Participants reported prejudice and harassment by coworkers even *after* their workplace-instituted training. Of note, one participant proposed offering training specifically to LGBTQ2S+ employees to equip them with greater knowledge of their rights and opportunities for recourse in the labour market.

## Considerations for LGBTQ2S workplace inclusion training

Participants perceived workplace training on LGBTQ2S+ inclusion to be beneficial, and many shared criteria they believed training should adhere to. We derived the following guidelines from their responses:

- Pursued by every employer, regardless of:
  - Company/organization size
  - Sector/type of work
  - Assumptions about staff/client identities
- Occurs regularly
- Offered to all staff and volunteers
- Run by a reputable trainer/organization, meeting criteria:
  - LGBTQ2S+-led/identified
  - Appropriately compensated for their time/labour
  - Not an employee doing this outside their typical job tasks
- Extends beyond “the basics” – for instance, by engaging more intentionally with gender diversity, or exploring queer history
- Includes intentional time for discussion and reflection
- Builds-in accountability: *“now that you’ve been training, what are you going to do about it?”*

## Employer accountability

The absence of reliable organizational data on LGBTQ2S+ employees was cited by some as a barrier to fully understanding the outcomes of gender and sexual minority individuals. While it is important to acknowledge the reluctance of some to having their identity data collected (as they were fearful of how the information might be used), several individuals urged more systematic measurement of key metrics for equity-deserving groups at the level of the workplace. They suggested this would be one way to a) shed light on inequities that might otherwise be invisible and b) encourage employers to set objectives and plans to achieve goals:

*I would like to see metrics how many people identify as [LGBTQ2S+], and how you are keeping them in your organization and allowing them to grow professionally ... I think having those metrics and committing to them would be one very big solution.*

*- Queer, Muslim, South Asian man*

Participants also emphasized the importance of employer accountability in fostering better outcomes, stressing that while creating or adapting policies to be more inclusive of LGBTQ2S+ employees was crucial, adequate enforcement was needed to effect change.

Each employee's assessment of their employer's accountability can affect their willingness to disclose workplace challenges. Several participants avoided raising issues with a supervisor due to the perception that their concerns would not be taken seriously. Conversely, those who were confident in their employer's response were more likely to bring issues forward and seek a resolution. One woman who had experienced sexualization from a male colleague in a previous job praised her boss's willingness to take her concerns seriously, which ultimately led to the colleague's dismissal. She noted the long-lasting impacts of this experience: "[It] has allowed me to go on with my professional experience and feel protected" (bisexual white woman). Another participant shared a similar experience, describing how her trust in her supervisor has allowed her to not only be more open at work, but also to address prejudice more readily when it occurs:

*I know no matter what, that my supervisor has my back. There's something about that security that feels not just empowering, but it's given me so much more agency. I feel like I can be very open about my sexual orientation, I feel like I can be very open about my progressiveness. And if someone does or says something that's discriminatory, I have no problem responding to that now, instead of feeling like I have to be quiet at risk of something happening to my position. I feel like I now can speak directly to that person, and demand that there will be repercussions.*

*- Bisexual cis woman*

Yet others discussed accountability as a function of employers meaningfully supporting LGBTQ2S+ employees' professional development and advancement opportunities. They felt this was in fact a means of moving beyond passive commitments to inclusion. In addition to improving access to skills development and training for LGBTQ2S+ staff, some participants expressed the need for more formalized pathways to advancement and promotion:

*I'm done with my employer only offering [mentorship]. I want sponsorship. I want them to say, 'because I need a diverse leadership, I'm going to promote you once you have fulfilled these performance objectives. I don't want a handout. I want you to give me a clear pathway to promotion.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

In this instance, the participant criticized employers' ongoing reliance on strategies such as mentorship as ineffective and demeaning, because they were not meaningfully linked with tangible targets and results for LGBTQ2S+ staff.

## Fostering inclusive LGBTQ2S+ environments

Participants expressed appreciation for employers who took intentional steps to foster and build LGBTQ2S+ community in the workplace. ERGs, Queer-Straight Alliances, and peer support opportunities were viewed as effective ways to build a sense of belonging and connection among LGBTQ2S+ employees, as well as to offer practical fora to advance conversation and action about LGBTQ2S+ issues and rights at work.

The celebration of major life milestones by LGBTQ2S+ employees, including marriage and parenthood, promoted a sense of acceptance and inclusion. One man shared his experience: *"When I got married, people collected a big card, and they made a big deal out of it ... It was celebrated in the way that anybody else would be celebrated"* (white gay man in the public service). Workplaces recognizing and participating in Pride and other culturally significant events were also framed as encouraging. One participant recalled the significance of a manager sending a note celebrating Bisexual Visibility Day to her team, which she felt was a simple yet powerful gesture. In other instances, participants were grateful for employers who took the initiative to facilitate discussions of topics of relevance to LGBTQ2S+ individuals, creating an environment where these subjects are understood as safe, professional, and appropriate.

Importantly, symbols or actions of inclusion on the part of employers were framed as beneficial under certain conditions. For instance, some participants emphasized the importance of ERGs being adequately resourced, granted some autonomy over the issues on which they focused, and taken seriously by company leadership: *"It's not like we're all gathering a bunch of queer people together and you just do your own thing. There's actually some meaningful support for us to lead our own initiatives"* (Asian, cisgender gay man). Similarly, employers' celebration of cultural events such as Pride would be viewed as insufficient and even harmful if it was not accompanied by other sincere and ongoing commitments. One individual posed the following question, reflecting on a former employer: *"Are you making your logo a rainbow, or are you reinvesting into the community, into the people, into the employees?"* (queer trans woman). In short, while participants depicted fostering LGBTQ2S+ community at work as a valuable pursuit, employers were urged to do this intentionally, with a view to effecting long-term and meaningful change.

Beyond any one measure, participants felt that sustainable change came from shifts among those who influence workplace culture in their attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours towards LGBTQ2S+ people. Actions viewed as performative – for instance, the celebration of Pride in the absence of concrete measures – were limited in their capacity to a) achieve greater equity,

diversity, and inclusivity and b) meaningfully affect the experiences and outcomes of LGBTQ2S+ employees.

One participant quoted below articulated the need for higher-order changes. Although their workplace had LGBTQ2S+ inclusion initiatives in place, they nonetheless faced ongoing transphobia at work because the overarching culture did not prioritize inclusivity more broadly: *“All of the things that were supposed to happen were in my workplace, but no one cared about them, so it wasn't effective. We need to figure out how to make people value and care about those efforts more than they currently are being valued”* (white genderqueer and transmasculine participant). Underpinning this quote is the notion that genuinely improving LGBTQ2S+ employment experiences likely requires challenging – and changing – deeply-held attitudes about gender and sexual minorities.

Finally, participants described how changes in workplace culture towards greater equity, diversity, and inclusiveness produced benefits for LGBTQ2S+ employees, such as greater openness and authenticity, stronger interpersonal relationships with colleagues, higher levels of job satisfaction, stability, and loyalty. However, it was clear that this type of approach had required intentional and ongoing efforts on the part of employers, including a willingness to take risks and “fail forward” in pursuit of an inclusive workplace culture. The following section details the practices that could support building a culture of inclusion.

## A CULTURE OF INCLUSION: PROGRESSIVE, FLEXIBLE, AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WORKPLACES

While policies and practices implemented specifically with LGBTQ2S+ employees in mind can considerably enhance the employment experiences and outcomes of LGBTQ2S+ employees, participants also advocated for workplaces to embrace an inclusive and progressive work culture that would enhance the experiences of all employees.

### Prioritizing employee well-being

Several participants praised employers who expressed genuine concern for their mental and emotional health. They shared accounts of overwhelmingly positive experiences in jobs where they felt this was a priority. Organizational policies and practices such as paid mental health days, supporting employees to set and maintain boundaries (e.g., not working overtime), regular messaging around the importance of work-life balance, and access to mental health benefits were all cited as ways to mitigate workplace stress, build employee loyalty, and increase job satisfaction.

These approaches require trust between employers and employees, and for workplaces to implement concrete measures of support. For instance, while participants valued having paid time off for mental health reasons, the effects of such a policy could be limited if not complemented by the redistribution or reprioritization of work tasks in the face of absences.

While workplaces prioritizing employee well-being are important for employees regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, participants suggested that the distinctive nature of stressors experienced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals rendered this type of approach especially beneficial. For example, one participant described moving to a job where he experienced less work-related stress and greater support for mental health and well-being, due to both increased employer flexibility and improved resources and benefits:

*A lot of things have improved for me. My mental health has definitely improved. I don't sit around and complain about work all day with my partner. We can actually enjoy our time together. We're both [in the same industry] and we're also both trans, so we've got bigger fish to fry than complaining about work.*

*- Transmasculine non-binary participant*

This example supports the notion that personal and professional lives operate in tandem. In particular, it conveys the distinct effects of positive workplace culture for those who are may be confronted with systemic oppression outside of their workplace.

## Case vignette 6: Re-imagining people-centred workplaces

What does a workplace that puts people first look like in practice? One Black, queer, agender participant spoke to this at length, contrasting their current place of employment with a previous one that had a dramatically different workplace culture. Their reflection is shared here, edited for brevity and readability.

*When there's not even balance between life and work, or if you don't even engage in community, or you don't have some relationship outside of work, then how can you be in balance? How can you be caring for yourself, caring for others, in a good, effective, holistic, way? If your only aim is to make the money or get the promotion, you're not going to care about the people working alongside you.*

*I had mental health problems. I had a boss say, 'I don't know what's wrong with you, but leave your problems at the door.' Speaking to me like I'm a human, not just this robot worker – I would have appreciated that. Asking, 'how can I support you further? Is there anything I could take off of your plate? Is there anything that needs to be adjusted?' It has shown me that as inclusive or accessible as a space might promote themselves to be, if they're not working for people with mental health issues, different disabilities, different capacities, they're not doing the real work.*

*How am I expected to compartmentalize the fact that I might be sick, hurting, depressed, or whatever, and come to work? How can I do my work in a good way and relate to people when I have to deal with health problems, mental problems, or the layer of dealing with transition, whatever way that looks? If I'm carrying this backpack of troubles, how do I work? How do I even allow my mind to focus on work? I think organizations have to ensure their workers are cared for. We go home and have to reproduce ourselves to go back to work. If you're hurting, ill, mentally ill, how do you take care of yourself to go back? If workplaces don't make that possible or easier, do they care about their workers? Maybe we're disposable...but do we want to work at places where we're disposable?*

*In my current job, we're so intentional about how we work and how we relate to one another. I'll say in the group chat, 'I'm not working at my % capacity,' and that is understood and encouraged. We're intentionally creating space. We communicate on a daily basis. We have a group chat that is just for, 'how are you doing, what are you working on, what are you thinking about?' It doesn't have to be work-related. We had an internal conflict last week and spent the entire meeting talking about it. I'm not used to this, but it's amazing. I never imagined that this much thought could or would go into a workplace. It's making sure that we check in with each other, that you can only do as much as you can do. If you let me know that you're at 100%, I'm not going to put more on your plate. Trying to relate to one another as people and not just as cogs, as robots. My boss will call me, 'how are you, how is your heart, how can I support you?' Wow...imagine if it was just always like that.*



## Flexible workplace environments

Participants spoke positively of employment experiences where they had been granted more autonomy over and flexibility in their work schedules. One woman's employer had offered her the flexibility to pursue part-time graduate studies alongside full-time work without a wage penalty, which she perceived to be integral to her career advancement.

Flexibility in work schedules was most often discussed in reference to mental health. One participant spoke about an employer who supported her absence from certain meetings when she felt it was necessary for her mental wellness, allowing her the required time and space to recuperate. Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring organizational policies surrounding illness and sick leave were also inclusive of mental well-being, particularly in the context of increased prevalence of mental health challenges among LGBTQ2S+ individuals:

*I can just tell my manager I'm having a bad mental health day – 'no problem, we'll talk later.' That's been so supportive, and I think it goes a long way in helping LGBT folks who often deal with mental illness and other health struggles.*

*- Bisexual woman*

Given the relationship between mental health and workplace performance and outcomes mentioned earlier, workplace flexibility can be seen as one measure to enhance LGBTQ2S+ individuals' success and experiences in employment.

Flexibility around workplace dress codes – including the absence thereof – was identified as an important way to foster self-expression and mitigate gender presentation-related stress. Gendered dress codes, as well as those with overly restrictive rules around tattoos, piercings, and hair and makeup, were described as constraining LGBTQ2S+ individuals' capacity to comfortably and authentically express themselves. One participant articulated the specific barriers they had encountered in the fact of strict company dress codes: *"How do I affirm my gender without, let's say, raising flags? Or without causing anybody to question me? Or without making myself feel unsafe?"* (Black, agender and queer participant).

While a more lenient company dress code might confer increased agency and authenticity, participants also described how it permitted self-expression through identifiers such as non-natural hair colours or clothing (e.g., buttons/pins) that could be used to identify other LGBTQ2S+ colleagues, as well as prospective allies to approach and build connections with.

## Case vignette 7: COVID-19 and workplace experiences

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on peoples' workplace experiences and outcomes came up repeatedly in conversations. While participants had mixed feelings about what the pandemic meant for their employment, some positive experiences emerged from work-from-home mandates specific to their LGBTQ2S+ identities. One participant, a non-binary, bisexual animation director, recounted their experience of beginning a new job where they were working from home during the pandemic:

*As I started this [new job], I was like, 'you know what, I'm just going to tell them that my pronouns are they/them. I don't have to go into the [office]. People don't have to see me, so I feel like I don't have to be performative. I don't have to dress a certain way, to appear a certain way; I don't even really have to be on camera. Because I'm interfacing with a lot of my employees on chat, I never get talk back, or talked over. Even in Zoom meetings, I'm not talked over – people give you your time.*

*Being able to go to the bathroom whenever I want! At the [job], you'd be working with 500 other people. I don't think there were even unisex washrooms [there]. You'd wait, and you'd wait, and you'd wait, and finally you'd get in. And as someone assigned female at birth, sometimes you just can't wait. So, that's been really nice.*

*[Working from home has] provided people with so much freedom. You don't need to pay for commuting, dress a certain way, present yourself a certain way; you don't even need to show your face. It doesn't work for certain jobs, especially when you have to interact with the public. But I feel like for sexual minorities, gender minorities, people with disabilities, not having to go through the two-hour commute each day is going to provide more opportunities. I feel like it made me feel more comfortable in my own skin, not having to stress out about what I'm going to wear, to make sure that I don't present as just female. I'd love for jobs to push for that, but not just jobs...schools, universities, to be able to offer more content online.*

## Valuing employees' contributions and strengths

While the importance of being valued and recognized by one's employer extends to everyone, it was nevertheless emphasized by several participants in our study as critical for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. It was particularly valued by those who had previously negative workplace experiences since feeling appreciated by their employer was a novel experience:

*At this new [job], they actually value my opinions. They want my feedback on tools, workflow. I feel very valued and respected because people want to hear the things I have to say, and they respect the fact that even though I've only been in the industry for a little less than six years, that I have valid contributions to make.*

*- Non-binary, bisexual animation director*

Several participants spoke favourably about employers who valued the unique strengths, skills, and contributions they brought into their work from their lived experiences. They shared experiences of employers who were aware of their identity and understood this as a strength in a professional context. As a result, some participants had been offered opportunities to work more closely with LGBTQ2S+ clients, incorporate a queer or trans perspective or lens into their assignments, and/or leverage lived experience as an accepted form of knowledge and expertise. One man described the implications of such an approach:

*To have my ideas, my analysis of what it is to be a queer man experiencing the health system be heard by my bosses and to be adopted into policies and programs...that to me is being valued not just for my labour, but being valued for all facets of my identity.*

*- Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector*

Benefits resulting from these scenarios were wide-ranging, including improved rapport and trust with customers or clients, a sense of being “*emotionally and intellectually supported*” (queer, pansexual and polyamorous participant), and a marked shift from LGBTQ2S+ identity being perceived as a problem to be addressed towards something managers actively appreciated. While this was not universally felt by participants (some expressed concerns about being pigeon-holed into LGBTQ2S+ work or being tokenized), many framed this type of approach as positively contributing to their workplace experiences.

## Emphasis on relationality

Workplaces that value and encourage strong interpersonal relationships among coworkers were frequently praised. While this is something that is likely appreciated by individuals of any gender or sexual identity, the distinctive advantages of supporting employees to connect and relate with one another on a personal level emerged as an important theme among participants.

In contrast to workplaces that discourage employees discussing their personal lives, LGBTQ2S+ individuals characterized close relationships with coworkers as integral to fostering openness and trust. In conversations, participants connected these practices to several outcomes, including greater transparency and access to support regarding mental health, more effective conflict resolution, and better interpersonal connections in the workplace. One individual, referencing coworkers who were “*super queer-friendly*” and whom he considered friends outside of work,

pointed to the reduced need to navigate disclosure in this type of environment: *“The day-to-day interaction where I have to figure out how much of myself I share at work...I can share more of myself at work now, I feel, than at previous jobs”* (transmasculine non-binary participant).

This type of environment challenges the notion that discussing personal matters is inherently unprofessional in a work context. Since LGBTQ2S+ individuals may often be forced to compartmentalize or conceal certain parts of themselves, the ability to show up authentically at work can be both refreshing and powerful. As one woman described:

*Being able to bring your whole self to work, if that means you are a bisexual woman, if that means you are a pansexual man, if that means you are someone who is transitioning...knowing that you don't have to leave who you are at the door can be really affirming.*

*- Cisgender bisexual woman*

While a few participants expressed a desire to keep their personal and professional lives separate, the notion of not needing to “leave who you are at the door” was framed as desirable by many: *“For me, being proud at work means being able to be myself fully, without any repercussions. Being able to talk about my wife with my coworkers, and just having all parts of myself seen”* (Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian). In this case, the opportunity to be forthcoming about one’s identity supported feeling proud at work.

## Adequate and equitable wages

Participants identified adequate and equitable pay as a major contributor to positive workplace experiences and outcomes. The significance of pay equity is important given the noted wage gaps between LGBTQ2S+ individuals and their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts, as well as other costs associated with being a gender or sexual minority.<sup>51,54</sup>

Some participants valued transparent salary scales as a means of facilitating LGBTQ2S+ employees’ access to fair and adequate wages. One participant quoted earlier, a genderqueer teacher, attributed their sector’s widespread use of transparent pay ladders as a central factor in their choice of occupation. In fact, transparent salary structures were seen not only as shields against outright wage discrimination, but also as supportive frames of reference during the wage negotiation process. Participants in other situations shared experiences of discovering they were being paid less from informal conversations with colleagues, and then lacked an avenue for recourse due to the absence of organizational salary standards.

## Comprehensive benefits

While access to workplace benefits targeted to LGBTQ2S+ employees was discussed earlier on, participants also mentioned the role of generous workplace benefits more broadly. Paid sick and parental leave, adequate vacation time, and comprehensive health and wellness packages were identified as integral components of a workplace benefits package that supports employees both in and outside of work. Moreover, participants characterized comprehensive benefit packages as better-equipped to meet the unique needs of LGBTQ2S+ employees. For example, one person attributed her ability to pursue two gender-affirming surgeries to the extensive vacation time provided by her employer. Another participant positioned strong benefits as integral to supporting LGBTQ2S+ employees to succeed and thrive in employment:

*Things like sufficient maternity leaves, sufficient health and wellness packages...it's not just having [LGBTQ2S+] people in [leadership] positions to make decisions and influence them. It's also about making sure that they've got the resources to show up. And when you're working with folks who have so many oppressions that they face, there's a lot of other things that impact them.*

*- Bisexual white woman*

## Holistic approach to equity and inclusion

Participants characterized workplaces that sought to create equally safe and supportive environments for various equity-deserving groups as facilitating favourable experiences for LGBTQ2S+ employees. They spoke of the limitations of workplace inclusion strategies that failed to attend meaningfully the needs of a diversity of employees:

*Spaces focusing only on single-identity issues like Black, Muslim, lesbian, women... that's where I start to find a lot more problems .... When we have truly diverse spaces, and diverse in more than one way, that's when I have found it to be better.*

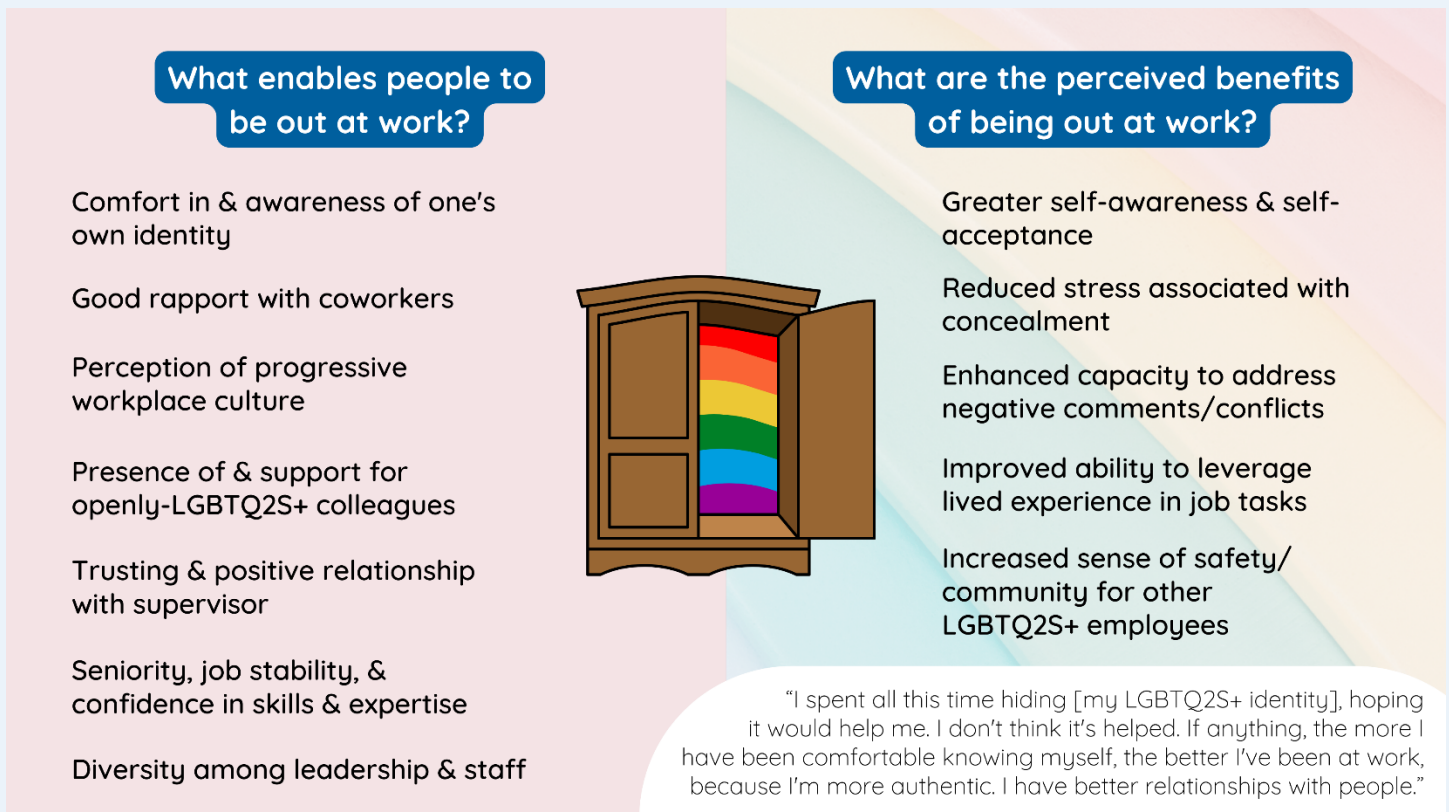
*- Black, agender and queer participant*

In fact, strategies that sought to recruit, retain, and promote employees of diverse backgrounds were framed as mutually reinforcing, since individuals often occupied several social locations.

## What enables people to be openly-LGBTQ2S+ at work, and what do they perceive as the benefits?

The themes of outness, disclosure, and authenticity in the workplace were frequently brought up in interviews and focus groups. Many participants felt unsafe being out at work as a result of the risks associated with greater visibility. Several challenged the concept and practice of “coming out” as inherently grounded in cisheteronormativity. While acknowledging the real consequences of disclosure, the literature points to potential related benefits that may emerge in certain workplace contexts, such as increasing the quality of coworker relationships, or serving as a catalyst for positive changes in workplace culture.<sup>55</sup>

Recognizing these complexities and the specific contexts where disclosure is safe, desirable, and beneficial for LGBTQ2S+ employees, the graphic below highlights the benefits some participants said they felt upon being open about their identity at work, and the factors that enabled them to do so.



## BEYOND BUSINESS: NON-WORKPLACE FACTORS

We close with a description of factors that contribute to positive employment experiences, but which go beyond individual workplaces, including strong support systems, social policy, and supportive legislation.

### Strong support systems

Participants described strong peer, family, and community support systems in childhood and adulthood as having had positive effects on their employment experiences. Several participants emphasized the positive impacts of caring, supportive, and affirming parents and families throughout their careers. In some cases, this was framed in terms of emotional support, from creating safe and secure environments for LGBTQ2S+ children to acting as confidants during career struggles later in life. One man who had experienced strong support from his parents in childhood and adolescence articulated the ongoing effects of familial support, or a lack thereof: *“If you’re not feeling safe and accepted at home, you’re not going to find it somewhere else. I’ve found that at home, and I’ve also found it externally”* (white gay man in the public service).

The financial safety net that a supportive family can provide may also equip people to make career decisions that would otherwise be less accessible. The same participant spoke to this, reflecting on his experience taking time off from school in pursuit of a career transition: *“I can’t imagine doing the things I did without being able to fall back [on my parents]. A lot of people that have lived similar experiences to me don’t have that.”* Another participant echoed the material effects of supportive parents, particularly in terms of pursuing the necessary training and education for one’s desired career:

*It’s super expensive to go to school [for my industry]. It’s super expensive to live [in my city]. I had opportunities that other people wouldn’t normally have. I didn’t have to work when I went to school because I lived with my mom.*

*- Non-binary, bisexual animation director*

Access to queer networks outside their workplace was also commonly referenced. Participants spoke about leveraging connections with LGBTQ2S+ peers to obtain employment and using these networks to gauge the safety of a job prior to applying. One individual shared how they had received a higher-than-anticipated starting salary at their current job, which they attributed to advice on salary negotiations they had received from a queer friend working there. Having LGBTQ2S+ friends in one’s life offered a forum to talk about and cope with challenging workplace experiences, especially when this support might not be available on the job. As one woman expressed, *“I have a wonderful support system outside of work”* (cisgender bisexual woman).



Participants pointed to community supports as another means of creating more inclusive communities for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. One participant articulated the influential role that youth-serving organizations had for him when he was younger, especially while facing isolation in other aspects of his life:

*It was [these programs] that were a grounding point for me, that were a saving grace for me ... If I didn't have those programs, those peers, those adults that I can have healthy relationships with, I don't know where I would have been.*

*- Transgender man working in youth services*

He went on to attribute these early experiences to his decision to pursue social work later in life. Similarly, one bisexual woman referenced growing up in an affirming and social justice-oriented faith community, which she characterized as offering her queer role models, helping her understand her identity, and shaping her decision to pursue a career in human rights.

Community-level supports were also discussed as playing an important role for LGBTQ2S+ adults. For instance, affirming mental health providers as well as an active local LGBTQ2S+ community enabled some participants to explore their identities, process work-related challenges, and develop strong relationships outside of the workplace. In the absence of these – especially outside of urban centres – participants struggled to acquire key supports that could help them cushion or cope with work challenges or barriers.

## Education

In several discussions, education was brought up as an actual or potential influencer of positive employment outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Some participants stressed the importance of incorporating content around LGBTQ2S+ identities and issues into school curricula in order to build awareness at a young age that might lead to more inclusive workplaces later on. Speaking as an educator, one participant speculated that curriculum was among the most promising mechanisms through which institutions other than employers could effect change:

*Curriculum is the most direct way we can impact educational spheres and spaces because curriculum is what we're held to as educators. I think that if those things were more directly implemented into different strands of curriculum at different ages ... I think that's the most direct way governments and educational institutions can [have an] impact.*

*- White genderqueer teacher*

One participant had observed the results of enhanced education around sexual orientation and gender identity in her current job, where she worked with youth: “One of my students said, ‘you

*haven't told us your pronouns, what pronouns do you prefer?' I hadn't even thought to consider introducing my pronouns at all"* (white lesbian transgender woman).

Beyond curriculum, others shared impactful experiences with teachers that they described as integral to their survival and success in school, and therefore employment. One participant, reflecting on a keen awareness of not fitting in at school, described teachers with whom he had a strong connection as “*saving graces*” (transgender man working in youth services). Participants also advocated for targeted scholarships and grants and population-based residence options at the post-secondary level.

## Income security

Some participants drew attention to the protective role of income security in enabling them to move through their careers and to make employment-related decisions. For example, one participant credited financial stability as supporting him to explore career options and transition between education and employment: “*I came from a well-off background. I had the privilege to be able to explore a bit more freely than maybe somebody else would ... I have the financial backing to be able to make those types of decisions*” (queer, Muslim, South Asian man). Another participant, pointing to LGBTQ2S+ income disparities and perceiving increased employment precarity among her peers, suggested that government programs such as guaranteed basic income might be one way to “*level the playing field*” (bisexual white woman).

## Health

In discussions, participants articulated a positive two-way relationship between health and employment outcomes. Many shared times in their lives when they had experienced improved mental and physical health, which translated to improved attendance and productivity at work. They emphasized how enhanced access to costly LGBTQ2S+-specific health services – for instance, gender-affirming procedures and mental health supports – was critical to improving health outcomes among LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Connections between income and health were also referenced, illustrating the mutually reinforcing relationship between income security, improved health, and better employment outcomes.

One woman, who described growing up in poverty and struggling with mental illness, described the diverse effects of working in a job with adequate pay and benefits:

*I've immediately noticed differences. I used to take almost all my sick days a year. I have not needed to now ... It's been mind-boggling to me: the improvements in my sleep, my ability to not have to take sick days, to not have to ask for extra sick days from my employer because I just can't function. My clarity in being able to also work through some [challenging workplace*

*scenarios]. With my history, I would have been having to take the day off the next day, but [I didn't] because I had the privilege of the money to invest in the services.*

*- Bisexual white woman*

In sharing this experience, this participant gave voice to the interdependent nature of income, health, and employment outcomes.

## Queering the *Employment Equity Act*

Introduced in 1986 and amended in 1995, Canada's *Employment Equity Act* ("the Act") is intended to address disadvantage and promote employment equity in federally-regulated industries and workplaces for four designated groups: women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities.<sup>56</sup> The Act places several obligations on employers with respect to the four aforementioned groups, including analyzing the degree of underrepresentation in their workplace, reviewing policies and practices to identify potential barriers, and providing reasonable accommodation.<sup>57</sup>

Several participants articulated the potential value of making the same types of employer practices mandated by the *Employment Equity Act* for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Some participants – including those at workplaces covered by the Act – also expressed frustration or confusion as to why their employer had made efforts at inclusion among certain equity-deserving groups, but not all.

It is worth noting that a private member's bill with this aim in mind was introduced in the House of Commons in 2019, but did not get past a first reading.<sup>58</sup> More recently, the federal government has convened a task force to review the Act, which might result in the inclusion of LGBTQ2S+ people as a designated group. This task force is expected to report in early 2022.<sup>59</sup>

## Legislating inclusion

Several participants maintained that legislative approaches were necessary to ensure and enhance the rights and inclusion of LGBTQ2S+ employees. Some were skeptical of relying on individual employers to meaningfully advance more inclusive workplaces, and instead called on governments to implement and enforce policies regarding discrimination, employment and pay equity, and stronger labour rights and standards (e.g., access to paid sick days).

Several participants expressed concern with the rhetoric that marriage equality represented the final frontier in LGBTQ2S+ rights, and emphasized the ongoing need for policy solutions that actively combat homo/bi/transphobia, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Enforcement of and accountability to any legislation were also noted as key, along with meaningful consultation with LGBTQ2S+ communities in their development:

*It's great that you have those policies and some legal standing, but at the same time, if you're not doing anything about it, it means nothing. And then from the bottom-up, working with the community, giving platforms, giving opportunities...it can be an opportunity for voice.*

*- Transgender man working in youth services*

These approaches were believed to play an important role in facilitating key actions on the part of employers and in fostering a legislative environment actively supportive of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in employment. Participants also included improved access to funding for LGBTQ2S+-led and -serving organizations as a higher-order policy recommendation, along with changes to population-level survey practices, such as the systemic collection of gender and sexual identity data and improving capacity to explore outcomes across different domains (e.g., health, education, employment).



## CONCLUSION

This report summarized findings from an in-depth qualitative study of the labour market experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals across Canada. Drawing on the voices of 34 participants in interviews and focus groups, this study sought to address a knowledge gap by focusing on the lived experiences of employment among LGBTQ2S+ individuals. The findings presented here present the stories shared by research participants themselves, including their employment journeys, the connections they made between those experiences, and their perceptions of underlying causes and implications. We hope this report adds valuable insights to the quantitative research being conducted in this area – including our own – by shedding light on stories behind the statistics.

Despite legislative and socio-cultural advances in LGBTQ2S+ inclusion in Canada in recent years, our findings suggest that LGBTQ2S+ individuals continue to face labour market and employment inequities that are systemic and mutually reinforcing with those in other spheres. The employment experiences of those with whom we spoke were commonly characterized by prejudice, discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion. In addition to implications for mental health and well-being, participants articulated specific examples where these experiences inhibited their capacity to access, maintain, and advance in employment. At the same time, participants' accounts conveyed important differences across the LGBTQ2S+ community in Canada, pointing to the role of diverse social locations in shaping the experiences of gender and sexual minority individuals. LGBTQ2S+ individuals whose experiences were additionally shaped by sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression described distinct and exacerbated disadvantage in employment.

Although our findings suggest that the employment journeys of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada continue to be characterized by prejudice and discrimination, participants' stories also displayed a great deal of resilience. Furthermore, several participants described jobs they found to be inclusive and affirming, and detailed positive experiences that pointed to potential solutions. For instance, they highlighted the significance of supportive colleagues and managers, inclusive employer practices, and people-centred workplaces to their ability to succeed and progress in employment. Even where participants struggled to identify positive workplace experiences, they offered strategies they believed would enhance LGBTQ2S+ people's

employment outcomes. While these findings are offered as participant-proposed solutions rather than formal recommendations, we hope they mobilize readers to action, with a view to developing policy and program interventions that are evidence-informed, inclusive, equitable, and effective for this population.

## NEXT STEPS

Over the upcoming months, our team will conduct an integrated analysis of the evidence from all three phases of the project in order to identify actionable data, research, programming, and policy recommendations to improve economic and labour market outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada. Our final report, integrating findings from all three phases, will provide an overview of:

- Gaps and opportunities for data development in Canada;
- Currently measurable quantitative relationships between LGBTQ2S+ (more specifically, sexual) identity, economic and labour market outcomes, and the determinants thereof;
- LGBTQ2S+ peoples' experiences and perspectives on barriers and facilitators to connecting to and thriving in the labour force; and
- Key factors for policy and program intervention to improve the economic well-being of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada.

This forthcoming report will further inform the conceptual framework for understanding mechanisms of labour market disadvantage experienced by individuals identifying as LGBTQ2S+ in Canada.

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## APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

### DESIGN

The study employed qualitative methods to develop a better understanding of the experiences of sexual and gender minority individuals currently or recently in employment, including their career pathways more broadly.

Through a combination of interviews and focus groups, the research team spoke with 34 unique LGBTQ2S+ individuals who were presently or recently (i.e., within the past 2 years) employed in the formal labour market. Participants were asked to share their experiences seeking employment, the hiring process, and day-to-day life in the workplace, in addition to how and to what extent these experiences may be shaped by their gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation.

Combining interview and focus group methods enabled the study to better elucidate individual experiences as well as provided space to validate, co-interpret, and explore potential solutions or recommendations in a group setting. To this end, while interviews focused on participants' personal employment and workplace experiences as well as potential mechanisms underlying employment outcomes, focus groups focused more on validating findings to date and exploring recommendations and solutions for different stakeholder groups.

The core research team involved in recruitment, data collection, and analysis was composed of white, cisgender sexual minority researchers at intersections of other social locations and lived experiences.

### RECRUITMENT, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

#### Recruitment

Participants were recruited primarily through the employer and community network of project partner Pride at Work Canada. Pride at Work Canada's employer network consists of nearly 150 employers representing diverse industries across the country, collectively employing over one million people. Meanwhile, their community partner network consists of a diversity of organizations across the country that serve LGBTQ2S+ individuals and communities, are committed to diversity and inclusion, and/or have a specific emphasis on combatting employment barriers and inequities for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. Pride at Work Canada has previous experience recruiting for research studies, and shared recruitment materials among

their networks via email and social media, which were subsequently disseminated to potential participants.

Interested participants were invited to contact a member of the research team, who then shared further background and consent information, confirmed the individual's eligibility for the study (see subsequent inclusion criteria), and asked a range of screening questions to ensure the sample was adequately representative and diverse (e.g., geographic location, type of industry/employment, gender/sexual orientation, other characteristics).

**Table 1** Inclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria
Self-identify as a sexual and/or gender minority
Currently or recently (i.e., in the past 2 years) engaged in paid employment (including work that is part-time and/or precarious, and self-employment)
Between the ages of 18 and 59
Reside in Canada
Speak English

For those selected to participate, the research team then gathered informed consent and confirmed logistics in terms of data collection. Recruitment for both interviews and focus groups took place simultaneously; when a participant expressed interest, they were asked whether they had a preference between participating in a focus group, interview, or both.

## Data collection

Given current restrictions associated with COVID-19 as well as geographic constraints, all qualitative data collection took place over Zoom. This enabled participation from individuals representing a wide range of geographic backgrounds (e.g., those in remote or rural areas) as well as facilitated national participation in focus groups. Recognizing certain barriers associated with online data collection, participants were offered a call-in option using their phone to interviews and/or focus groups. All data collection activities were designed to enable participants' engagement regardless of the device they choose to use.

Participants were offered a \$50 honorarium in the form of an e-gift card as a thank you for their time, either upon completion of their interview and/or focus group. Participants who chose to

withdraw from the study were also offered honoraria. Following the data collection, participants were sent any quotes the project team selected to use in reporting or knowledge translation materials. They were asked to confirm if they are comfortable with these quotes' inclusion, as well as how they prefer to be identified in any written materials (e.g., pronouns, preferred labels for gender identity/sexual orientation, age, industry, etc.). Participants will also be sent any publications or other related materials once they are made available if they requested such during the consent process.

Audio-recording was optional for interviews and focus groups. Written consent (via email) for recording was sought by the project team in advance to ensure the availability of a second researcher to take detailed notes, if a participant declined consent to record. While Zoom does not provide the option to only audio-record, participants were assured that only audio (i.e., not video) recordings of the interview would be saved.

In addition to seeking consent to record in advance via email, the interviewer/moderator confirmed consent to record at the beginning of each interview and focus group. If any participant expressed that they no longer consented to be recorded, a member of the project took detailed notes instead. In addition, closed captioning was enabled on Zoom as both an accessibility tool, as well as to assist in the note taking process. Copies of closed caption transcripts were saved in secure folders alongside notes and audio recordings. The closed captioning function was explained during the consent confirmation process at the beginning of each interview, and if any participant expressed that they did not consent to closed captioning, the captioning was turned off.

The interview and focus group protocols were used as guides to conversations. Depending on the participant's answers, questions could be skipped or re-ordered. Similarly, probes were used where appropriate to gather additional information from participants and allow them to share stories and experiences.

## Data analysis

Audio-recordings and closed caption transcripts were used to supplement detailed notes, including to capture exact quotes as needed. Members of the research team oversaw this process and checked to confirm notes and transcripts were accurate to audio recordings. In cases where participants did not consent to audio recording, detailed notes were taken by a member of the project team and reviewed by the primary interviewer/moderator.

Once detailed notes were finalized, team members undertook analysis using iterative thematic coding, with an initial coding structure based on Phase 3 research questions and sample description (e.g., sexual orientation, gender identity, industry/occupation, other demographic factors). Each team member took primary responsibility for a research question, reviewing all



detailed notes and developing iterative themes through review. Team members met regularly to discuss emerging findings and refine themes across research questions. Early themes were organized into PowerPoint decks in order to present back to participants during focus groups as a validation exercise, which allowed for further adaptation and nuancing of themes in response.

Themes were further validated with project partners in group meetings throughout the analysis and writing process. Case vignettes were also identified during this phase, with particular participants' experiences identified as demonstrative of key themes within each research question, or across all research questions.

## STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The strength of this research lies in several areas:

- **Using qualitative research to build on previous quantitative phases of the project:** This report builds on previous phases of this project with respect to the labour market outcomes of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada. In particular, previous quantitative findings used a large, national, population-based survey linked to tax files to explore socioeconomic and health inequities experienced by this population, most notably – earnings. The qualitative findings presented here advance our understanding of how and why gaps across key socioeconomic outcomes remain between sexual minority individuals and their heterosexual counterparts. Importantly, they incorporate the perspectives of gender diverse individuals, which were absent in the quantitative phase.
- The **validation process** used to present emerging themes to focus group participants and confirm participant quotes and descriptors represents an important methodological step to build trust with the LGBTQ2S+ community and with participants. In addition, it ensured findings were grounded in participant experiences and community contexts, and maintained active and ongoing consent of participants throughout the research process.
- **Shared research identity**, where all members of the research team involved in direct data collection with participants also identified as LGBTQ2S+. This allowed them to bring their lived experiences to the project and build trust with participants. While not a necessary component of conducting LGBTQ2S+-specific research, *“it is important to understand that if you are not a member of the community you are researching, this deprives you of the personal knowledge and experiences that your participants will have”*.<sup>60</sup>
- The **diversity of participants** included in this phase. As mentioned early in this report, participants self-identified as a range of gender identities and sexual orientations, with numerous racial and ethnic identities, with experiences of disability and neurodivergence, across six Canadian provinces, of various ages, from a range of sectors and industries, and

with many other identities and backgrounds. This diversity of experience provided extremely rich data and variety of experiences.

However, several limitations within this phase of research must be noted. Although the participants represented a diverse array of perspectives across different social and geographic locations, our largely convenience sampling recruitment method led to a paucity of certain voices, including no representation from the territories or Central Canada, and very limited representation of Indigenous people (i.e., only one in our study). Our means of recruitment, through Pride at Work's network of corporate and community partners, may also have skewed our sample towards representation from certain occupations and industries over-represented among those networks. Our recruitment methods relied on self-identification of participants, which can affect the types of experiences that were shared during interviews and focus groups, for individuals who may be reluctant to self-identify as LGBTQ2S+, particularly through a network of employers. Data collection relied on Internet access, potentially limiting participation among individuals with limited or unreliable Internet, and those with lower technological skill levels. More generally, given the sample size and recruitment methods, the results presented here cannot be interpreted as representative of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada, but instead explore trends across the individual experiences shared with us during this process.

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