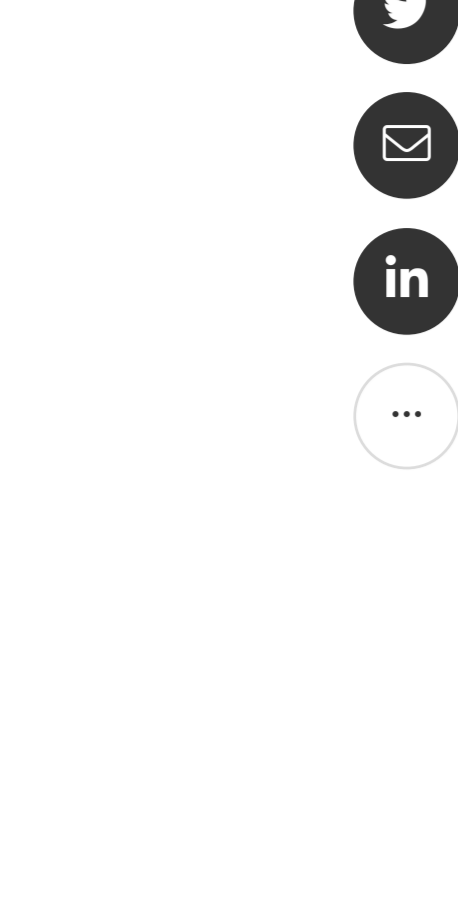


INSIDE DEVELOPMENT | INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

Development sector has further to go on gender inclusion, experts say

By **Rebecca L. Root** // 21 October 2022

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A workplace in Kiev, Ukraine. Photo by: Alex Kotliarskiy on Unsplash

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Encouraging the use of pronouns in the workplace is just the first step in creating more inclusive working environments for members of the LGBTQ community and much more needs to be done, sector and labor rights experts told Devex.

While it's common for development organizations to say they're gender inclusive, structures and systems — application forms, employment profiles, entitlements, and benefits — may not broadly be set up to be so.

"Sadly, a lot of people who come into the development sector have their own biases and prejudices, which they bring into the workplace. It's shocking," said Gurchaten Sandhu, an LGBTQ economic and labor rights and inclusion expert.

At a time when more people may not self-identify as male or female, or identify as a gender different to the one assigned at birth, encouraging the disclosure of pronouns in the workplace, according to the [Human Rights Campaign](#), can reduce incidents of misgendering. It can also create a culture of respect and belonging, says LGBTQ workplace equality nonprofit [Out & Equal](#).

Data shows that over the past three years, Google searches on pronouns in the workplace have increased by 500%.

"Ultimately, there's not huge pressure now, but adding a pronoun policy, being clear about it, and sending signals in upper management that people are taking pronouns seriously would pave the way for a revolution [in the way the next generation is identifying] that is going to happen," said Fabrice Houdart, executive director of the Association of LGBTQ+ Corporate Directors and a former World Bank staffer and United Nations human rights officer. "One way or another [the revolution] is coming to the U.N., the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund."

"Power dynamics exist in our sector that make it much more difficult for LGBTIQ+ people to speak up and push back in ways that value their own identity."

— Kevin Wanzor, head of operations, OutRight Action International

Guidelines produced by U.N. Globe, which fights for equality and nondiscrimination of LGBTQ staff in the U.N. system, already encourages staffers to share pronouns when introducing themselves, in email signatures, and on business cards.

Yet their use comes with caveats, some experts said, adding that true inclusion in the workplace ultimately means going beyond simply encouraging the disclosure of pronouns.

The complexities at play with pronouns

Without grounding pronoun inclusion in any history, the move can be seen as tokenistic, said Katlego Kai Kolanyane-Kesupile, a cultural architect and development practitioner. "That isn't gender consciousness. That's [being] more pronoun conscious," she said. Instead, it's a practice that needs to be "understood as a living thing rather than bending to the demands of contemporary culture."

For example, correct pronoun usage is not only about respecting a person's identity, but also their spoken language, Kevin Wanzor, head of operations at OutRight Action International, explained in an email. "I think pronouns are very important, but I primarily only hear discussions about pronouns from an English-centered place."

While gendered pronouns are used in all of the U.N.'s official languages, there are other languages and cultures in which the nomenclature may not translate. Spoken Mandarin, for example, uses the same word to refer to all genders, while Tswana, one of the official languages of South Africa, doesn't use pronouns at all.

When encouraging the use across all international offices and duty stations of implementing aid and development organizations, Susie Jolly, honorary associate of the [Institute of Development Studies](#), highlighted the need to remember that local context matters. "It's important not to assume that nonstraight, non-CIS identities in different contexts are all going to fit this particular set of labels, which is Western derived," she said.

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There are also some arguments, Jolly explained, that binary culture was brought in by colonial forces to global south contexts. For example, in precolonial Peru, according to some research, trans identity and culture "existed and played an important role in Andean religion and society." Colonial influences then suppressed those identities and contributed to the stigma and discrimination such individuals have experienced.

In that regard, Jolly suggested that the introduction of pronouns in development workplaces could be about undoing that work while also taking a more progressive stance.

"At the same time, [it's] realizing that for some people, like [those] in a U.N. agency who are trying to lobby governments to get them to agree with something, are not going to always be able to focus on finding the best label ... If you could get some commitment to trans rights but not require that people change all the pronouns, that might sometimes be the way it goes [to get] a good result," Jolly said.

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Another consideration for development agencies is that disclosing pronouns may not always be safe to do. Often working away from home in more conservative countries where, nonbinary or trans humanitarians could face an increased risk of attack.

According to [Overseas Development Institute](#), "when greater visibility draws threats and violence, the ability to 'pass' as straight or cisgender, or to maintain a degree of privacy, can be critical to safety and survival. This means that strategies seeking to 'shine a light' on exclusion can be ineffective at best and harmful at worst."

There are other motivating factors for choosing not to identify one's gender or sexual orientation. Research conducted with 11 self-identified lesbian and gay humanitarian aid workers with [Médecins Sans Frontières](#) found that all participants opted not to disclose being a member of the LGBTQ community during an overseas mission to avoid the risks "of disturbing team dynamics" until they could determine how their international colleagues would react. They cited a lack of training for managers on how to manage identity issues in the field as an issue.

"Staff should be trained to handle related information with discretion and to respect confidentiality, knowing that people with diverse SOGIESC [sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics] are often subjected to harassment, discrimination, and criminalization," said Sandra Smiley, a humanitarian worker and public health consultant.

Ways forward to further inclusion

As a first step to fostering further inclusion, Sandhu said organizations must create safe spaces for employees to talk about these issues. As it stands, he believes a fear of job loss and not wanting to complain prevent open dialogue on how to create a more inclusive environment.

"Power dynamics exist in our sector that make it much more difficult for LGBTIQ+ people to speak up and push back in ways that value their own identity," Wanzor agreed, adding that development and humanitarian leaders must lead on these issues directly.

Guidelines produced and shared via email with Devex by the Association of LGBTQ+ Corporate Directors suggest leaders incorporate gender neutral language in board meetings, use "they" or "their" when addressing a wider group, and drop the use of "Mr, Mrs, Miss, and Ms" in meeting minutes.

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"I think the first step for international organizations is to think whether gendered language is bringing anything useful, meaning ... can we remove 'Mr' and 'Mrs' from minutes and use people's first names and last names without losing any substance?" Houdart said.

Moving beyond pronouns, the employee benefits an organization provides should also be mindful of the different needs of the LGBTQ community, experts said. "[For] somebody who needs to get gender-affirming care — whether it's hormone replacement therapy or they're saving up for surgery — these sorts of things are not taken into consideration," Kolanyane-Kesupile said.

U.N. Globe suggests that "trans and gender non-conforming staff be given accurate answers to questions related to health insurance coverage of their medical needs" and that a team of focal points be established in various departments.

RedR UK recommends staffers be onboarded with information on predeployment briefings, the available LGBTQ-focused health care policy, housing policy, and resettlement and rehabilitation policy so that new hires don't feel the need to immediately reveal their sexual orientation and how they identify if they don't want to, and to help them make an informed decision about possible deployment in advance.

This should be supplemented, it said, with a policy stating that there will be no repercussions for opting not to deploy because of a gender identity issue while a full contextual analysis should be completed to ensure a security manager isn't assuming risk without speaking to the LGBTQ member of staff.

These aspects matter, Houdart explained, because LGBTQ people are careful in selecting workplaces, focusing on those that are going to give them opportunities and respect their dignity.

"Even small steps such as acknowledging the existence of nonbinary people, adapting forms, adapting communication, reminding employees that there are pronoun policies that they have to respect, encouraging senior management to add pronouns in their signature, even gaining understanding of the various form of nonconforming gender identity among HR professionals ... would go a huge way in welcoming the next generation of nonbinary development workers or development practitioners," he said.

Marking important dates such as the "International Day of Remembrance for Transgender People" and the "International Day of Homophobia and Transphobia" could also help, Houdart said, while RedR recommended creating LGBTQ staff networks as a means of building "sustainable support structures."

Additionally, organizations should remind staffers from the LGBTQ community regularly that they are worthy, seen, and supported, Houdart said.

"Understand that LGBTQ people come into the workplace with the baggage of their experience in society. If you've been told constantly that you're worthless by your family, teacher, priest, society at large, and the media, when you come into the workplace, that baggage does not miraculously disappear," he explained. "It's not enough to hire us, you have to create a level playing field in which we can succeed."

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