

How to.... Build Positive Acceptance in the Workplace

Humanitarian organisations operating in restrictive political and social contexts face a unique challenge: upholding their commitment to LGBTQIA+ inclusion while protecting the safety of staff, volunteers, and the displaced people they serve. Building a workplace culture of positive acceptance is not a single event. It is an ongoing, intentional process rooted in trust, dignity, and shared humanity.

This guide provides humanitarian actors, including NGOs, UN agencies, refugee-led organisations, and civil society organisations, with practical, safeguarding-informed approaches to fostering genuine acceptance for LGBTQIA+ staff and persons of concern, even where legal and social barriers exist.

- **Safety First:** Always assess legal, social, and contextual risks before taking any action.
- **Do No Harm:** Every step must prioritise the physical and psychological safety of staff and persons of concern.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Never mandate involvement in inclusion activities; preserve individual choice.
- **Confidentiality:** Protect identities at all times, disclosure must occur with informed consent.
- **Intersectionality:** Recognise that LGBTQIA+ displaced persons may face compounded vulnerabilities related to gender, ethnicity, religion, and disability.
- **Year-Round Commitment:** Acceptance must be embedded in daily operations, not reserved for awareness events.

Practical Steps for Aid Organisations

1. Establish Visible but Measured Leadership Commitment

Acceptance begins at the top. Leaders set the tone for what is normalised and what is tolerated.

- Issue a clear internal statement affirming zero tolerance for discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).
- Use neutral but affirming language in all staff communications, such as referencing "diversity, dignity, and inclusion" to signal values without creating unnecessary risk.
- Ensure recruitment, staff performance, and promotion policies explicitly prohibit SOGIESC-based discrimination.
- Designate a trained, trusted staff member as an LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Focal Point—someone staff can approach confidentially.

2. Create Psychologically Safe Spaces

Psychological safety, the belief that one can speak up without fear of punishment or humiliation, is key to building acceptance.

- Establish voluntary "safe conversation" spaces (in-person or virtual) where staff can discuss inclusion, wellbeing, without fear of judgment.
- Use closed, invitation-only formats to protect participant identities. Never record sessions or share attendance lists.
- Offer anonymous digital channels (e.g., encrypted suggestion boxes or secure forms) for staff to raise concerns or share experiences.
- Train line managers and HR staff to respond to disclosures with empathy, confidentiality, and a trauma-informed approach.

3. Deliver Contextually Appropriate Training & Awareness

Education is crucial for acceptance. Training must be adapted to the local context to be effective.

- Host private "Lunch & Learn" sessions on allyship, inclusive language, and understanding SOGIESC identities.
- Frame training within your organisation's humanitarian mandate, connecting inclusion to humanitarian principles, humanitarian law, and staff wellbeing.
- Use trusted, vetted facilitators, ideally from local LGBTQIA+-affirming CSOs, who understand cultural and legal nuances.
- Circulate reading materials, podcasts, and case studies via secure internal channels.
- For new staff, integrate inclusion and SOGIESC awareness into onboarding processes as a core safeguarding component.

4. Embed Inclusion in Policies and Safeguarding Frameworks

Structural change requires policies that name and protect LGBTQIA+ staff and persons of concern explicitly.

- Review your organisation's Safeguarding Policy, HR Policy, and Code of Conduct to ensure SOGIESC-based discrimination and harassment are named and actionable.
- Establish confidential, multi-pathway reporting mechanisms for discrimination and harassment, including options that do not require in-person reporting.
- Ensure case management protocols for persons of concern include SOGIESC-sensitive referral pathways to specialised services.
- Conduct regular anonymous staff wellbeing surveys that include questions on inclusion.
- Develop disciplinary procedures for SOGIESC-based harassment and communicate these to all staff.

5. Use Subtle, Voluntary Visual and Symbolic Signals

Small, deliberate signals can communicate solidarity without creating undue risk.

- Offer optional pronouns in email signatures (he/him, she/her, they/them) this is a meaningful gesture of solidarity.
- Where safe and socially permissible, allow voluntary use of inclusive symbols such as small rainbow pins as personal choices, but never as a requirement.

- Display internal inclusion commitments on secure intranets or internal noticeboards rather than public channels.
- Avoid photography or public identification of staff who participate in inclusion activities.

6. Build Peer Support and Networks

Peer-to-peer solidarity is one of the most powerful tools for acceptance in restrictive environments.

- Support the formation of a voluntary, confidential staff allyship group or LGBTQIA+ Staff Network.
- Connect staff networks with regional or global LGBTQIA+ staff networks within your organisation or partner agencies.
- For refugee-led organisations, ensure community-facing peer support also extends to displaced LGBTQIA+ persons through trusted referral networks.

7. Partner with Local LGBTQIA+ Civil Society Organisations

Local CSOs are your most important partners.

- Identify local LGBTQIA+-affirming CSOs that operate in your context.
- Co-design inclusion approaches with CSOs, avoid imposing external frameworks that may not reflect local realities.
- Protect CSO partners: avoid naming or publicly associating them with your organisation without explicit consent.

8. Maintain Crisis Preparedness and Safeguarding Protocols

In restrictive contexts, preparedness is a safeguarding duty.

- Develop a crisis protocol for incidents involving LGBTQIA+ staff or persons of concern, including escalation pathways, legal contacts, and emergency relocation options.
- Ensure all LGBTQIA+ staff know how to access emergency support confidentially and quickly.
- Regularly review and update security and safeguarding protocols in response to shifting legal and political contexts.
- Prepare organisational spokespersons with clear, consistent pro-diversity messaging in case of public backlash.

Additional Resources

- **The PRIDE Centre:** Templates, legal analysis, and tools for [LGBTQIA+ inclusion](#) in humanitarian settings

☒ Checklist for Organizing Pride in Restrictive Environments

- ☐ **Review Safeguarding & HR Policies:** Ensure SOGIESC discrimination is explicitly named and actionable in all relevant policies.
- ☐ **Establish Confidential Reporting Channels:** Provide anonymous, multi-pathway options for staff to raise concerns.
- ☐ **Plan Low-Visibility Activities:** Prioritise online webinars, closed discussion groups, and private learning sessions.
- ☐ **Use Neutral Language Where Necessary:** Frame inclusion within your humanitarian mandate (e.g., dignity, protection, wellbeing).
- ☐ **Protect Identities at All Times:** Avoid photos, tagging, or any identification of participants without consent.
- ☐ **Deliver Contextualised Training:** Facilitate SOGIESC awareness and allyship training adapted to local realities.
- ☐ **Engage Trusted CSO Partners:** Work with LGBTQIA+ civil society organisations.
- ☐ **Develop a Crisis Protocol:** Prepare escalation pathways, legal contacts, and emergency support options.
- ☐ **Monitor and Adapt:** Collect anonymous staff feedback regularly and update approaches based on context.
- ☐ **Share Resources:** Direct staff to [The PRIDE Centre](#) for information and guidance.

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