



English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2020:20

To be an issue – LGBT+:
working environment and
attitudes in the
Church of Norway

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In light of reports of concern, the National Council of the Church of Norway has taken the initiative to commission a study of the working environment for persons with LGBT+ identity who are employed by the Church of Norway (CoN). Fafo has conducted the study in collaboration with the Institute for Church, Religion and Worldview Research (KIFO). The objective of the study has been to capture how and to what extent employees with an LGBT+ identity are exposed to particular stresses and challenges in the performance of their work.

The project has made use of two methodological approaches. First, an online survey has been undertaken among CoN employees. Second, qualitative interviews have been conducted with 17 CoN employees who identify themselves as LGBT+.

The questionnaire was distributed to 5297 persons, and 1801 responded – a response rate of 34 per cent. Of these, 120 identified themselves as belonging to an LGBT group. The respondents are spread over all dioceses, employer relationships in the CoN organisation and employees in both ordained and non-ordained positions, as well as the entire range of professions and job categories in the CoN.

Employees who reported an LGBT identity were asked about their experiences and incidents related to their sexual orientation and gender identity with regard to their job situation, hiring process, social support in the workplace, relationship to colleagues, volunteers and churchgoers/members, experience of negative comments, exclusion from the working environment, harassment and discrimination based on their sexual orientation/gender identity. We also wanted to capture instances where LGBT persons have experienced the working environment as supportive, examples of openness in the working environment, and how they perceive the public debate.

Church employees who reported not to have an LGBT identity were asked about their attitudes to LGBT issues, including their attitudes to LGBT persons and to working with persons who have an LGBT identity. Further questions focused on their perception of attitudes and experience of discrimination of LGBT persons in the working environment. The questionnaire consisted of the following modules: background, gender identity and sexual orientation, position and employment conditions, social conditions in the workplace, and attitudes and experiences associated with LGBT.

The objective of the qualitative part of the study was to obtain a better understanding of the contexts in which there is a risk of exposure to discrimination or

harassment, and of how this risk may manifest itself. The qualitative interviews can also help us better understand the correlations that we can observe in the quantitative material. We asked about the employment process and about the employer's reaction, as well as the follow-up of whistleblowing. Moreover, we have been interested in changes in the perceived working environment over time. The informants represent a diverse group of employees in a variety of positions and employment relationships in the CoN. The interview guide contained the following main issues: attitudes in the workplace, the perceived psychosocial environment, openness about one's own identity, experience of attitudes in the congregation and local community and experience of discrimination/harassment, as well as the perception of security, respect and protection by the employer. The findings can be summarised in the following points:

How do employees with an LGBT identity/orientation perceive various aspects of the performance of their work?

The general impression of the daily life of church employees with an LGBT identity is positive: The majority report high job satisfaction and experience support from and affiliation with their workplace. There are, however, some serious nuances and exceptions from this general picture. Direct harassment and discrimination do occur, but tend to be associated with users and volunteers rather than superiors and colleagues. Moreover, compared to representatives of the majority, LGBT groups report systematically lower job satisfaction and less participation. This applies to ordained as well as non-ordained positions, and the difference persists even when we take into account whether the respondents are employed by the local church council/congregational council or the diocesan/national council. The concept of 'minority stress' is applicable to the experiences of some LGBT persons. Persons who have not experienced any direct discrimination may also be left with a perception of outsidership. They may perceive themselves as the embodiment of an issue and the debate on sexual orientations in church contexts as a strain. In other words, there is a duality to the findings, with job satisfaction and a positive working environment on the one hand, and challenges and negative experiences on the other. Many feel that they are in a continuous coming-out process. Some have experienced rejection, and many have a fear of rejection that gives rise to uncertainty in encounters with colleagues and the working environment.

How do LGBT persons perceive the process associated with their initial employment in the CoN?

Some, the majority of whom are employees with an LGBT identity, have experienced being asked about their living arrangements in the course of the hiring process. Some employees with LGBT identity have experience of being denied a job or promotion. Many are afraid that their living arrangements will be used against them. There also seems to be a certain selectivity regarding where per-

sons with an LGBT+ identity apply for jobs, based on where a positive attitude can be expected. People tend to seek out safe places.

How widespread is the experience of exclusion/discrimination for reasons of sexual orientation?

One in every five LGBT respondents has experienced discrimination, and moreover, one in every ten answered ‘don’t know’. This implies that the perception of direct discrimination is so widespread that each individual needs to perceive this risk as real. One in every four reports that it does not feel natural for their partner to accompany them into a job-related setting. In the more liberal dioceses, the employees are on the whole more inclined to report that LGBT persons are subject to unequal treatment. This may be due to a tendency for persons with an LGBT identity to apply for jobs in more liberal dioceses, and a greater number of employees in more conservative dioceses may therefore have little experience of having persons with an LGBT identity as colleagues. An awareness around discrimination and exclusion may help in recognising such situations more easily. Many employees with an LGBT identity demonstrate adaptive preferences. They feel that they need to handle unpleasant episodes and will not necessarily register them as discriminatory behaviour. We have received reports of experiences that outsiders would often classify as discrimination, that were not reported to superiors.

What effect does the ecclesiastical debate on sexual orientation and living arrangements have on LGBT persons?

Two different, theologically legitimate views on the LGBT issue prevail in the CoN. In the survey, there is widespread agreement that this is positive. On the other hand, we can see from the qualitative findings that this situation is perceived as stressful, and in the quantitative survey nearly half of the respondents report that the public debate in the CoN is gruelling to relate to. Belonging to LGBT groups is a strain, because their life and feelings are constantly being questioned. Compared to others, employees with an LGBT identity report a somewhat lower feeling of affiliation with their workplace and have a lower score on job satisfaction and participation. The fact that many LGBT persons report not being open about their sexual orientation or sexuality in general indicates that they may feel that it is complicated to work in the CoN as an LGBT person.

What do employees in the Church of Norway think of having LGBT persons as colleagues in clerical positions?

Survey findings show that more than 70 per cent of the CoN employees believe that there is nothing wrong about a sexual relationship between two adults of the same gender. Two out of three find it positive that the CoN permits different views. There are also positive attitudes to having LGBT persons as colleagues, but this applies to a lesser extent to bisexual and transgender persons than to lesbians and gays. There is also some variation across the dioceses when it comes to

attitudes to having colleagues and superiors with an LGBT identity; the respondents in Oslo and Hamar dioceses tend to be more positive than respondents in the Agder og Telemark, Møre and Stavanger dioceses.

How do employees in the Church of Norway perceive the way in which the working environment relates to LGBT persons?

There are some differences between those who identify themselves as LGBT persons and those who do not. For example, those who do not define themselves as LGBT persons more often tend to believe that the CoN prioritises efforts to promote diversity. This also applies to the efforts undertaken by trade unions and safety delegates. More than one-half of those who are employed by the diocesan council or the National Council agree that the CoN prioritises efforts to promote diversity, compared to only a little more than one in every four of those who are employed by the local church council or a congregational council. The qualitative interviews suggest that leaders in the CoN take a serious view of discrimination and harassment of LGBT persons. Even those informants who reported negative descriptions of the conditions for LGBT persons in the CoN in general often recognised that leaders and superiors tried to take discrimination seriously. This appears to apply to conservative and liberal leaders alike. However, there are exceptions to this rule; we have been presented with narratives of clear violations of the working environment legislation.

How has the situation of employees with an LGBT identity/ orientation changed over time?

A majority of the respondents with an LGBT identity agree with the assertion that the situation for employees with an LGBT identity has improved over time. Those whom we interviewed recognised this, and acknowledged that it has led to considerable changes for them. Many of the informants also noted that the awareness of discrimination and harassment of LGBT persons has increased. The interviews indicate that there is more awareness of these issues also among those who are more conservatively inclined and opposed to the church blessing same-gender cohabitation. Some were concerned with demonstrating that they recognised LGBT persons as people, although they could not condone same-gender cohabitation for theological reasons. A number of LGBT persons reported, however, that they could be ambivalent to this kind of benevolence from conservatives.

Openness in the working environment

Most of the respondents are openly gay. However, secrecy (or lack of openness) remains widespread. More are open about this in private settings than in the workplace. Five per cent keep their identity secret from friends and 12 per cent

from their families, and 22.5 per cent are not open about their identity in the workplace. Only one-half of the respondents have revealed their LGBT identity to their immediate superior. The main reason for keeping their sexual orientation hidden is fear of negative repercussions. Although a minority, there are enough of those who have negative experiences to cause each and every one to assess the risk of openness. Others state as a reason that they do not consider it appropriate to discuss sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace. One in every four do not see it as natural for their partner to accompany them into job-related settings.

Personal strategies and adaptive preferences

We find that employees with an LGBT identity have different ways of coping with this situation. A few agree with those who want to stick to what can be termed conservative attitudes, and believe that celibacy is the proper way to cope with their sexual orientation. Others call for a struggle for equal rights and acceptance of the entire range of LGBT groups. A third group prefers as little attention as possible and finds it meaningful to be a standard employee. The two latter groups predominate over the former. We also find fatigue and minority stress. LGBT persons tolerate more and show adaptive preferences. Some apply for jobs only in geographical areas where they know that they will be accepted. Others choose to be only partly open about their sexual orientation in order to forestall negative situations.

Transgender persons/gender identity issues

Few of the respondents identify themselves as transgender. Some of the respondents who do identify themselves as transmen or transwomen report not wanting to become a topic of discussion. Others have received negative feedback on their gender expression. Approximately one-half of the employees have an open attitude to gender identity issues. A majority of the respondents are accepting of having a colleague or boss who is transgender, although this majority is smaller than it is for the other groups (LGB). There is a lot of uncertainty here. The main impression is one of silence about gender identity issues.

About belonging to a group

A tension emerges between not necessarily being directly or indirectly exposed to unequal treatment or harassment on the one hand, and knowingly working with or under the leadership of someone who thinks that people belonging to your group should not be there on the other. This appears to impose a considerable strain on many respondents. For church employees, the minority stress can be exacerbated by their association with a group that sees itself as being subject to

constant debate. Although only a minority has experienced direct discrimination or harassment, this happens sufficiently often to give rise to fear. Church policy, with its two legitimate theological views, represents a compromise. There is a risk that church employees with an LGBT identity perceive a situation of powerlessness that makes this kind of compromise a strain.

A general summary of the findings shows that most respondents perceive the working environment positively, and there are few reports of direct discrimination. However, there is a difference in the responses from those who report to have an LGBT identity on the one hand, and representatives of the majority on the other. Although the majority of the employees with an LGBT identity report never having experienced any discrimination, there is a not inconsiderable minority that does. Discrimination does happen. The descriptions of being a church employee and also having an LGBT identity are characterised by a lot of uncertainty and bitterness. *Representing an issue* can be a personal strain.