



LGBT in Construction: Exploring Experiences to Inform Inclusive Practices

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The study explores LGBT workers' experiences in the construction sector with a focus on diversity, different working contexts, experiences and career development. The main aim is to amplify the voices of LGBT workers and provide a forum for people to come together to promote positive change.

Why investigate experiences of LGBT workers in the sector?

Although there has been a sustained focus in recent years on understanding the experiences of underrepresented groups in construction such as women and minority ethnic workers, there has been a lack of work that has explored the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) workers (See Barnard and Dainty, 2018 for a review).

An annual survey collaboratively conducted by New Civil Engineer, Architect's Journal and Construction News revealed that homophobia is commonplace in the construction industry; many gay men and women encounter homophobic comments in the workplace and a small minority of gay employees reported that they could be open about their sexuality.

There are relatively few studies that focus specifically on LGBT construction sector: there are empirical studies that explicitly focus on the experiences of lesbians (Denissen & Saguy 2010; Frank, 2001; Wright, 2011, 2013), homosexual men (Chan, 2011), and non-heterosexuals (Chan, 2013; Ramchurn, 2015). All the studies in the construction sector identified instances of homophobia, occurring in contact with clients (Chan, 2013) or with colleagues (Wright, 2013). Worryingly there is evidence of discrimination subsequent to individuals' coming out, masked through the guise of performance assessment (Chan, 2013).

Riley (2008) suggests that construction workers themselves are not necessarily homophobic but that it is the hetero-normative culture in construction that is most problematic, an issue also highlighted by Chan (2013). In the face of homophobia and discrimination LGBT employees say that they want and need inclusion, safety, and equity (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). Researchers in LGBT in organizations, and construction specifically, have clarified rationales for action and associated considerations. It has been suggested that the next steps are for both large and small construction companies to engage fully with LGBT diversity (Riley, 2008), this engagement should be proactive and connected to broader concerns around social responsibility (Colgan et al., 2007).

What we did

Carried out a review of previous relevant research and conducted in-depth interviews with 16 people and focus groups with 8 LGBT employees who work in construction. The one-to-one interviews were carried out with 1 trans man, 2 trans women, 1 bisexual cis-woman, 8 cis-men who identify as gay, 5 cis-women who identify as lesbian (Cis is a term used to describe people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth). There is a wide age range of those interviewed: between the ages of 24 and 54; and participants are employed in a wide range of roles in the sector, such as quantity surveyor, shipping, structural engineer and quality management. Eight people took part in the focus group discussions: 1 trans woman, 1 bisexual cis-woman, 5 cis-men who identify as gay, 1 cis-women who identify as lesbian. However, the range of interview and focus groups participants does not reflect the study's ambitions, which was to interview a diverse range of people within the LGBT community. We have not interviewed anyone who predominantly works on site, those from ethnic minorities or who is not 'out' despite attempts to target recruitment to those groups via social media and contacts in the construction sector. Therefore, this limitation should be considered when viewing the findings.

In the interviews and focus groups we used a qualitative approach by asking open questions about the person's work experiences and career, their LGBT identity and perceptions of industry practices. Direct anonymised quotes are used to illustrate key points and allow the research participants' voices to come through the analysis. A stakeholder workshop was also held with attendees from across the sector to discuss the study findings and feed into recommendations for improvements in employment practices in the sector, culminating in an agenda for change.

The Stakeholder workshop was attended by representatives from: Action Sustainability, Aggregate Industries, BAM Nuttall Ltd, Constructing Equality, Constructing Rainbows, Equality and Human Rights Commission, Katalytik, Kier, Kier Highways, and Taylor Woodrow.

What we found

Interviewees stated that the construction industry has changed significantly over the last few decades in line with wider societal trends towards diversity and inclusiveness. However, the general consensus is that there is still progress to be made within construction in relation to diversity and inclusion for LGBT groups and more widely. Some interviewees suggested that a major barrier to LGBT diversity and inclusion in the workplace stems from a lack of diversity within construction, particularly at the senior level, with generations of employees that hold traditional views in relation to LGBT and gender-related issues. Indeed, several interviewees suggested that beyond the LGBT community, there is a lack of diversity within construction:

‘And it’s never been that attractive to minority groups, not just LGBT but women in construction, black ethnic minorities, people with disabilities as well, there are all roles that people can play from management through to on the tools on the ground and for me the organisations that are succeeding in attracting people are those that have a more diverse culture’ [Trans female Interviewee]

When discussing progress in relation to LGBT diversity and inclusion in construction, some interviewees compared the industry with other sectors or industries they had previously worked in. Some insights suggest that the construction industry has made good progress in relation to LGBT diversity and inclusion in the workplace and was compared favourably to the armed forces and the police force by gay men in the interviews.

Case study: A gay man’s life’s journey in construction

‘I left school and I went to work on building sites and I’ve known since, you know you become aware of these things that I was gay but I was born and grew up in a [working class] town ... so you can imagine that environment and going to the local comprehensive and that so I absolutely buried it. And then all through my ... career [in another sector] as well.... And then I went into construction but because I was not out I used to hear first-hand all of that banter and that nasty stuff being said and to my shame actually I sometimes even went along with it and then it all changed.

[His marriage ended and he was diagnosed with severe depression].

And that then was the start of me actually coming out. I told my wife and we separated, it’s all good now, it’s all very amiable now. So my experience within the construction industry as an out person is still relatively new... but I’ve only ever had positive things from them. ... But when I go to see clients or when I go on site these days, I don’t I neither shout about it or hide it, if I’m asked I’ll be perfectly honest, I’ll be open and honest with everybody but it never actually, I think because I work in that professional environment rather than somebody dealing with guys on site, it never really comes up in conversation and even if it did I can’t imagine there would be anything to concerned about’

Site and office differences

A major theme in the research was a dichotomy within the construction industry between office workspaces and the construction sites. Participants often framed office workspaces as sites of diversity, inclusion and acceptance for LGBT employees and other minority groups within the industry, e.g. females, ethnic minorities, disabled people. Construction sites were often framed as traditional, exclusive spaces dominated by hyper-masculine white males. Interview participants were predominantly based in offices, rather than site locations, and they talked about the conscious decision through their career to seek out a place they feel safe.



In the stakeholder workshop the different working contexts were discussed. Site culture is thought of where more overt homophobic comments are voiced. Bullying-banter is commonplace and 'must be put up with'. However, office culture can be worse for gossip, but easier to control if there is management support for a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination.

There is also difficulty with ensuring zero-tolerance through the supply chain across site and office contexts. Therefore, there is a potential role for procurement policies that address these issues, framed in language that emphasises the benefits of inclusive working environments.

The higher level of diversity in office workspaces within the industry was sometimes posited as a reason why these spaces are more inclusive for LGBT employees than construction sites:

'For me at head office it's a lot more, from my experience, it's a lot more kind of, got people of different races, a high proportion of women working in the office, but I'm sure that's not as reflected on site and I think, the women that I've spoken to say they don't feel as comfortable on site as they do in head office and I don't necessarily feel like I'd be so comfortable with my sexuality on site as in the office I don't have any issue with it, it doesn't feel like anyone's judging, everyone's just there doing their job and not getting involved with personal business'
[Gay male Interviewee]

Overall, there was a perception amongst interviewees that office environs represent diverse, inclusive and accepting spaces for LGBT employees within construction, whereas more needs to be done to address the lack of diversity within construction sites to facilitate the inclusion of LGBT employees in these workspaces. However, research participants and workshop attendees highlighted that there are pros and cons of either working contexts. Whilst on the whole office cultures are

less hostile, they are complex and nuanced in ways that can render them as problematic as site.

Work as a safe space

Some interviewees suggested that work is a safe environment for them to express their identities and be themselves, and that this cultivates positive and productive working conditions for LGBT employees. One interviewee even stated that work is a safer place than home, given difficulties in coming out to family members. This highlights the importance of promoting diverse and inclusive working environments where LGBT employees feel recognised, accepted and able to be themselves.

Many people in the interviews described work as a safe space during their periods of coming out or transitioning. One trans-male participants said that if it hadn't been for the support he received, both formally and informally:

'I would have been another statistic, as in I would have committed suicide' [Trans male interviewee]

Another described how due to regulations, laws and structures in place, in meant that if they experienced homophobia or discrimination, they would be able to report it in a formal way. This gave them security that they felt they did not have in public spaces.

Examples of negative experiences mainly focus on interactions with clients and colleagues:

'I've had a couple of situations where colleagues have completely ignored me and refused to talk to me when they knew who I was' [Gay male interviewee]

'We had a phone call from a customer who had a complaint about something and they referred to the fact that they'd placed the order with me and called me a load of names that were you know homophobic, like oh it's that puff that you've got in there, or words to that effect. But it was quite horrible'
[Gay male interviewee]



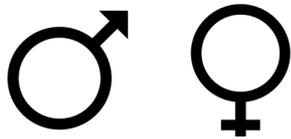
Discussions in the workshop focused on the importance of the employer in creating a safe space and the need for good policies to protect staff – whether from clients' or colleagues' discriminatory behaviour.

We talked about how far the construction sector is experienced as a safe space in relation to other contexts – in schools, families, the community for instance and a question was raised about who the people are that see work as a safe space: is it experienced as safe for particular people within the LGBT community and not others?; What about those not out at work?

Another question raised was how best to leverage change in the sector? Public authority equality duties can have an impact if public contracts are awarded to organisations. However, where the contracts are with private organisations, the transaction process raises challenges around where policies can and should be most effective. Although 'pink-washing' – a corporate veneer of inclusivity like the 'green-washing' phenomena in relation to environmental or sustainability issues - should be avoided.

Gender a bigger obstacle at work than sexuality for women

Cis-female participants (i.e. female at birth) expressed that being a woman within the industry is a greater issue for them than their LGBT identities:



There was agreement expressed in the workshop around the idea that gender is a greater issue than sexuality in the workplace for lesbians and bisexual women. It was discussed how lesbian, bisexual or trans women face discrimination because they are women; whereas gay men face discrimination because of their sexuality.

The intersections of gender and sexuality are influential – if you are female and gay, both mark you out as different, but you can't hide you're a woman.

The assumption is that as a woman in construction you are either being sexually objectified or gay and join into the sexual objectification of women. Reasons include societal norms regarding who does what kind of work and stereotypical perceptions of men and women regarding masculinity.

'I think being a woman is the hardest thing in construction. You can't hide that, I can choose who I tell about my sexuality, but being a woman is so difficult in this industry, we've just seen with the gender pay gap report and you know my colleagues, a female colleague and I were discussing that we're absolutely sure if you benchmarked our salaries with our peer group we would be on a par with our male peers, but what we feel is we're under promoted. So we may be on a par with our peer group but we think that we're not at the right level, so things like that'
[Lesbian woman interviewee].

The domination of organisations across the construction sector by white heterosexual males, particularly at the very top of companies, was posited as a more substantial barrier to their career progression than their LGBT identity. The term 'old boys club' came up repeatedly to describe gender-related issues within the industry:

'Yeah it's just things like the old boys club you know going out after work and there was one instance where they were all invited to a race day including the person who worked for me so I was at work and they were all at the race day and I was like well this is weird, so I called them out. And I've been in situations where people have been promoted who are doing a lot less, and then when you sit down and you talk about your progression and that and they say well this is the bit you need to work on, and it's like well it feels like you're trying to get me to 100% before you promote me but there are people you've promoted who aren't 100%' *[Bisexual woman interviewee]*

Female interviewees described how these two aspects of their identity combine to place them at a double disadvantage within construction, as members of minority groups that are not taken seriously as colleagues. Whilst the lack of women in parts of the sector is a recurring issue in construction, some women participants outlined how they had progressed

within construction firms by first entering in administrative roles and subsequently moving into technical roles. This pathway through administrative into technical roles within construction represents a positive example of career progression for women within the industry.

Practical ideas for tackling the issues raised

The study findings prompted discussions during the stakeholder workshop, leading to a range of actions that could be used in the sector to build a more inclusive working environment for LGBT employees.

Who	What	Why
All	Take ownership of the inclusion agenda	It is important to question who 'owns' the inclusion agenda? Responsibility should not be solely on HR, rather all have responsibility to challenge behaviours. The mainstreaming of health and safety culture is an example of how companies raised awareness of the issues with everyone and changed mindsets in the sector. Networks are helpful but are challenging to set up. Linking LGBT issues to a diversity agenda more broadly may help with this. The role of allies, individual role models, and champions are crucial: organisations should facilitate this alongside a presentation of the business case. There is a need for champions but beware of being too over-reliant on individuals to progress an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda.
All	Change internal scripts and be aware of importance of language	Education on acceptable terminology and the development of spaces for us all to gain confidence in the right language to use and evolve our understanding is lacking. For example, thinking 'I've been okay so it must be okay', or phrases such as 'that's so gay'; 'big girl's blouse' and learning how to be active bystanders. There is need for scripts to challenge behaviour/ comments for allies/ bystanders. Zero tolerance means having confidence that you will be supported. But concerns were raised about how to challenge indirectly. Some behaviours are deeply ingrained and part of fitting in. However, leadership key to clamp down on non-inclusive language.
All	Voice concerns, ask for help and guidance from above and below	Some issues are not readily identified and rely on individuals voicing their concerns. The recognition of how everyone can role-model inclusive behaviours, including normalising respect, and call out bad behaviour.
All	Sharing good practice	There are some good initiatives in the sector that organisations may wish to emulate and learn from. Shadowing other organisations, alongside mentoring initiatives, would allow this to happen effectively.

Who	What	Why
Managers	Recognise range of differences in teams	Within the LGBT community there is a range of experiences reported, for example women in different parts of the sector have different experiences of sexism. Also, an intersectional approach - considering ethnicity, age and generational differences - is part and parcel of developing a more inclusive working environment.
Managers	Support workers when they challenge others	For a more inclusive culture there should be back up from supervisors or managers if you challenge behaviours. Supporting individuals' right to challenge: 'don't walk by'. This builds on the concept of the 'active bystander'.
HR and managers	Be aware of privacy issues and the need for clear communication of rationale for data collection to improve LGBT data quality	There is also a dearth of accurate or continuously monitored data on LGBT. Company demographic data can have high proportion of 'prefer not to say' responses when asked about sexuality as staff sometimes question why companies need to know this kind of information.
HR	Communicate and enforce code of conduct	Effective implementation and monitoring of policies crucial. It is the employer's responsibility to enforce policy/code. Policies could be reinforced through the introduction of behavioural competencies in performance reviews. Monitoring of middle managers by senior managers with corresponding impacts on career if fail to address the issues. Clear sanctions for employees who infringe the code of conduct sends a message that discrimination is not tolerated.
Leaders and HR	Outward displays of support for LGBT workers	Reported importance of 'Bring your whole self to work' campaign – and rainbow lanyards as they show who is supportive. Outward displays of support at individual and organisation level deemed essential.
Senior and middle managers	Resources for middle managers to develop joined-up, business-case led actions to identify and address the issues relevant to the context in which they work	Key challenges for actions to address discriminatory behaviours include disparate organisational structures, for example in companies where departments work in silos and HR policies are differently interpreted and applied. It was argued that middle managers - 'frozen middle' – are margin shapers who need to be given time to address issues. It was highlighted that there is a business case for tackling discrimination, which companies need to learn to better understand client needs.
Senior managers and leaders	Support management training	The skills needed to deal with the range of issues raised and move the industry forward require good people management. This includes helping middle managers build engagement by valuing the work of others.

Who	What	Why
Equality and diversity practitioners	Work on inclusion with self-employed people in the sector	Large organisations have greater resources to tackle inequalities. SMEs and self-employed workers in the sector would benefit from tailored advice on inclusion that acknowledges the specific contexts in which they operate.
Sector-wide leadership	Focus on productivity and engagement in policy	Move the discourse away from skills shortage (which means people and organisations feel they can get away with bad behaviour) to refocus on productivity and engagement.
Sector-wide leadership	Development of a sustainable procurement tool	Client requests for inclusion need to be cascaded through the supply chain. This can mean it is focused on one project only, but these projects can also be a catalyst for change throughout the sector. This would encourage good practice in procurement from sub-contractors – or they risk not getting future contracts. Promoting the use of ‘approved suppliers’ would encourage businesses to engage in inclusion.
Sector-wide leadership and Equality and Diversity leaders	Evaluation of public procurement framework	An understanding of how this works in practice and the benefits and challenges of the approach might help spread inclusion objectives more widely.
Sector-wide leadership and Equality and Diversity leaders	Development of an industry-wide charter mark for equality and diversity	Clarity on equality and diversity across the sector is lacking strategic leadership – a charter mark would highlight the importance of inclusion and define indicators to better understand the range of issues the sector faces. Organisations’ engagement in equality and diversity would be improved in order to achieve awards.

Recommendations

Alongside the various specific ideas for actions that arise from the study, we have developed overarching recommendations that could feed into a strategy to improve LGBT inclusion in the sector. These are:

Greater support for specialised LGBT support networks/groups. Where companies had formal LGBT networks set up within the company, LGBT employees often feel a greater sense of recognition, acceptance and empowerment within the firm. Those who are active in LGBT networks should receive recognition for their contributions. There is also scope for greater collaboration between LGBT networks and other groups focusing on equality and diversity inclusion agendas.

Embed facilitating LGBT visibility and awareness in normal business practice. Visibility in the physical sense (e.g. networks, badges, meetings/socials, presence at the London Pride event) as well as intellectual sense (awareness of LGBT groups and what this means for their identities) was crucial in facilitating positive experiences for interviewees. Outward displays of support for LGBT help workers feel more welcome.

Actively promoting diversity and equality in the industry throughout the supply chain. Many interviewees stressed the importance of promoting diversity and equality within the industry, both specifically for LGBT employees and in a broader sense, e.g. gender, race, disabilities. There is scope for greater integration of EDI into procurement processes, especially in the private sector where more encouragement is required. This could include a differentiated EDI strategy depending on context (focus, size) and alternative career pathways into technical roles from parts of the sector that are more diverse.

Training for colleagues, particularly managers and leaders. Some interviewees suggested that it is important for colleagues to have LGBT-specific training to facilitate awareness, understanding, and to provide the tools to ensure an inclusive and welcoming working environment. This could include a focus on language and the development of scripts on how to practically challenge negative behaviours as and when they happen.

Development of a sector wide code of practice. Effecting positive change will demand that behaviours are challenged. Developing a code of practice based on 'zero tolerance' that construction firms might adopt represents an important first step in addressing discrimination wherever it resides. For such as initiative to work in practice we suggest an overarching body is hosted by the Construction Industry Council to oversee the development of the code of practice and monitor take up by professional bodies in the sector.

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