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Building Inclusive Workplaces for Lesbians and Bisexual Women in Hong Kong's Financial Services Industry



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Celine Tan
Bonnie Lam
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FOREWORD

We first met in 2018 when Celine brought up the lack of lesbians and bisexual women's voices in the financial sector. There was no study focusing exclusively on workplace challenges facing lesbians and bisexual women in the overall Hong Kong financial industry. As the pioneering Co-Chair of the formalized HK LGBT Interbank Forum and the founder of Lesbians In Finance, Celine has extensive experience in the industry over 15+ years. As a gender and sexualities scholar, Denise has been researching and publishing on lesbian communities in Hong Kong for more than a decade. Even though there were excellent studies carried out by others on LGBT+ inclusion and public attitudes towards LGB-inclusive businesses over the years, we both realized that there is a research gap in mapping out the working conditions and discrimination that lesbians and bisexual women face in the finance arena. Being a woman comes with a set of workplace challenges; Being a lesbian, bisexual or a non-identifying woman with same-sex desires compounded the issues. This study is the first in Asia to highlight the obstacles faced by these women serving in financial services.

Funded by Lingnan University's Innovation and Impact Fund, this study aims to raise the professional standards of the overall finance industry, inclusive of employers, employees, clients and customers. We hope to increase the visibility of lesbians and bisexual women in the sector, improve lesbian and bisexual women's quality of life in addition to their social networks including colleagues, families and friends. We are grateful to all the respondents, focus group participants and working committee members for their insights and most importantly, for their belief in our work. We strive to be seen and heard, in key decisions on promotion or conversations on work-life balance.



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Study Objectives

To increase public awareness of the workplace issues and challenges that lesbians and bisexual women working in Hong Kong's financial services industry face.

To raise the professional standards of the overall financial services industry.

Introduction

Workplace inclusion is a core component of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Hong Kong. Workplace inclusion points to the need for employers to recognise diversity among their employees, to acknowledge employees' diverse contributions to the work environment and to raise professional standards for the work force. Diversity within a workplace requires the inclusion of persons with different backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, health status, sexual orientation and gender identity. In 2017, the United Nations released a paper titled "Standards of Conduct for Business for Tackling Discrimination against Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Intersex people" that made a business and economic case for workplace inclusion. There are positive returns for companies that take up CSR principles in supporting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people (LGBTQI) in the workplace. The Harvard Business Review (2014) indicates that a higher level of diversity within companies equates to better business performance, and a Credit Suisse study (2015) shows LGBT-inclusive companies to report higher annual returns on equity and investment. In 2014, Community Business established the Hong Kong LGBT+ Inclusion Index to highlight best practices for LGBT+ inclusive work environments. In the years since, the index results have been used as a benchmark for organisations in Asia to establish LGBT+ inclusive human resources policies and practices.

As a global financial centre, Hong Kong relies on its financial services to drive the economy and to provide jobs. The financial and banking industry comprises services related to banking, fund management, securities, insurance, debt and private equity. Similar to other private and public sector industries, the financial and banking industry is not immune to discriminating practices in the workplace. A comprehensive study on female talent and employment across various business sectors concluded that women are poorly represented at senior levels. Published by the University of Hong Kong and Meraki Executive Search & Consulting (2019), the "Female Talent Pipeline Study" conducted research interviews with over 200 large companies and over 100 women working within those companies. The study found that talented women leave corporations not only because of family obligations, but also, and even more often, because of a lack of promotion opportunities. The situation calls for a change in corporate culture to recognise female leadership and women's contribution to overall problem resolution in the business world.

The LGBT workforce has been described as “a workforce in hiding” (Dupreele et al., 2020). Even with increased awareness of LGBT rights and an increase in diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives and employee resource groups, many LGBT employees still choose not to come out to their colleagues and clients. Lau and Stotzer’s 2010 study on employment discrimination and sexual orientation found that 29% of 792 respondents had faced discrimination in the workplace for being gay or lesbian. The study further reported that younger, less-skilled and -educated LGBT employees face even greater discrimination. Another study found that 60% of LGBT employees hide their sexuality and gender identity at work for fear of what others will think, of being stereotyped and/or of losing professional relationships (Community Business, 2012). The study’s 626 respondents also reported being verbally insulted or mocked (60%), receiving fewer training opportunities (28%) and being denied a promotion even though fully qualified (24%). The respondents also provided accounts of sexual harassment (11%) and bullying (5%). A non-inclusive, hostile work environment has a negative impact on gays, lesbians and bisexual women. Depression and unhappiness at work have a direct impact on personal health and job performance, which has serious productivity and cost implications.

Our aim in this study was to examine the specific challenges and barriers faced by lesbians and bisexual women working in Hong Kong’s financial and banking industry. Lesbians and bisexual women face a double glass ceiling in the workplace as a result of both their gender and sexual orientation.

There is currently no legislation protecting sexual minorities from any form of discrimination in Hong Kong. Although there are two ordinances extending recognition to persons in unmarried cohabiting relationships regardless of sexual orientation or next-of-kin relations, namely, the Domestic and Cohabitation Relationships Violence Ordinance and the Electronic Health Record Sharing System Ordinance, numerous multinational companies, banks and consulates have had to do battle with immigration officials over the right of expatriates with European and Canadian citizenship to bring their same-sex partners to work in the city owing to a lack of recognition of same-sex marriages registered abroad. It was not until July 2018 that Hong Kong’s top court delivered a favourable ruling requiring the Immigration Department to grant spousal visas to same-sex partners. In June 2019, after a four-year legal battle, the Court of Final Appeal finally declared same-sex couples who married overseas to be eligible for joint tax assessment and other benefits available to civil servants. For Hong Kong to remain competitive in global business and in championing best practices, the government needs to address issues of discrimination against LGBTI persons as a matter of urgency.



Research Methodology

An anonymous online survey available in both Chinese and English was administered from May to August 2020. The survey was distributed through our community partners, the queer women-specific social media app Butterfly, and professional and personal networks in financial services.

Recruitment criteria included:

- 1) Self-identification as: a lesbian, bisexual or transgender woman, intersex person in a lesbian relationship/with lesbian desires, or a woman in a same-sex relationship/with lesbian desires.
- 2) Working in the financial services industry (Banking, IT/Insurance/Legal/Human Resources departments of financial institutions) and based in Hong Kong.
- 3) Eighteen years of age or above.

A total of 103 survey responses were received. In August 2020, two focus group interviews were conducted, one in Cantonese (no. of participants: 11) and the other in English (no. of participants: 5). One unforeseen challenge with survey recruitment was the difficulty of sending out surveys to major business organisations without clearance from each organisation's human resources department. Our distribution channels were therefore restricted to individual-based or LGBT+ employee-based networks. As a result, the survey was unable to reach lesbians and bisexual women outside these networks. Some respondents also refused to answer all survey questions.

WHAT IS YOUR AGE GROUP?

18-25
12%

26-35
49%

36-45
24%

46-55
13%

55-64
1%

65 and
above
1%

Please note that all percentages are rounded up and may not add up to 100% as result.

WHAT IS YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

(Sexual orientation is a term to describe your emotional, romantic or sexual attraction)

Lesbian
68%

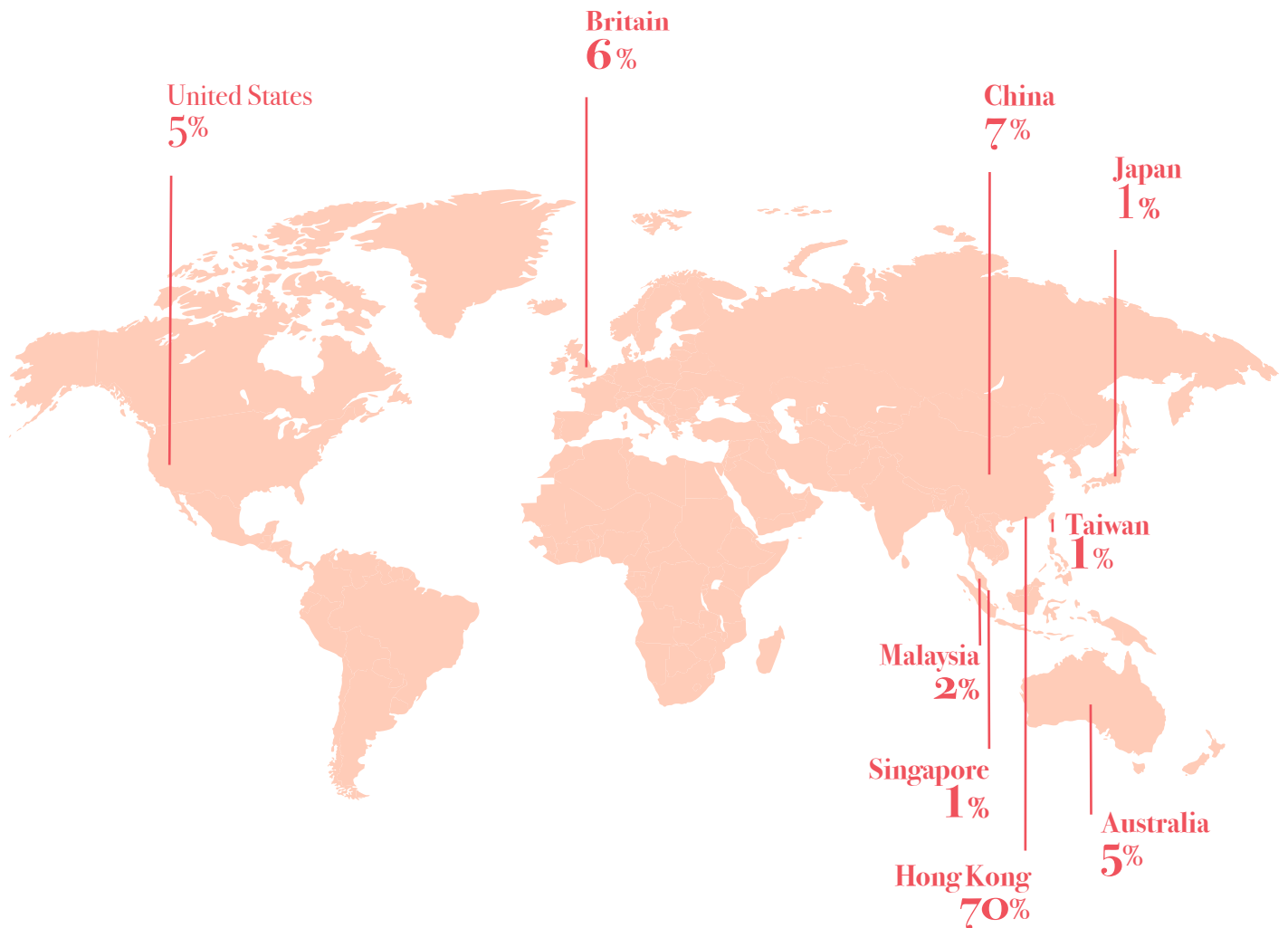
Bisexual
19%

Pansexual
5%

Other
8%

WHAT IS YOUR NATIONALITY?

(Nationality refers to your current travel document)



WHAT IS YOUR LEVEL OF EDUCATION?

2%

Secondary / High School

71%

Post-Secondary / University

27%

Postgraduate / Master's / Doctoral

WHAT IS YOUR INCOME?

\$
5% HKD \$1 - HKD \$15,000

\$ \$
39% HKD \$15,000 - HKD \$39,999

\$ \$ \$
23% HKD \$40,000 - HKD \$80,000

\$ \$ \$ \$
9% HKD \$80,000 - HKD \$100,000

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$
24% HKD \$100,000 and above

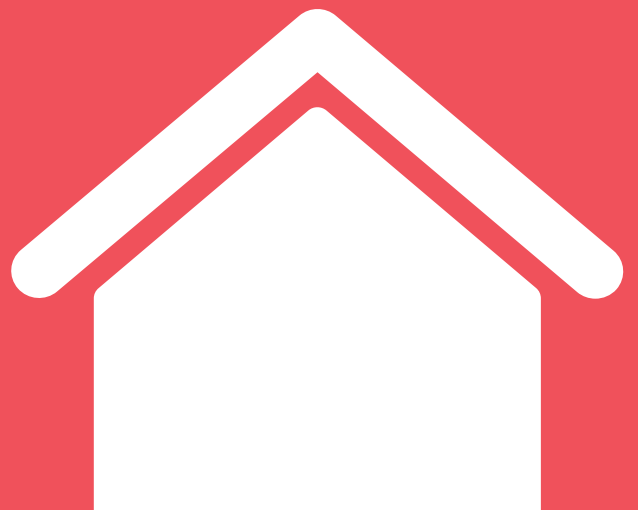
ARE YOU OUT AS A LESBIAN, BISEXUAL OR TRANSGENDER WITH YOUR FAMILY?

36% No

46% Yes

18% Partially

46% of survey respondents were out to their families. 18% reported being partially out to their families and provided written comments indicating that some of them were only out to their siblings. Disclosure of sexual orientation often did not include extended family members



ARE YOU OUT AS A LESBIAN, BISEXUAL OR TRANSGENDER AT WORK?

40% No

37% Yes

23% Partially

Only 37% were out at work
with 23% being partially out
to close colleagues.

WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP STATUS/ MARITAL STATUS?



28% Single

51% In a Relationship / Relationships

17% Married/ Civil Partnership

4% Divorced/ Separated

FOR
SAME-SEX MARRIAGE/
CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS,
IS YOUR PARTNER
LOCAL
OR
EXPATRIATE?



DO YOU HAVE CHILDREN OR ARE YOU THINKING OF HAVING CHILDREN?



68% No

10% Yes

22% Thinking of having children in the future

With respect to parenthood, 10% of the survey respondents had children, and 22% were thinking of having children in the future. This finding points to the heightened need for family planning, IVF (in vitro fertilization) and other assisted reproduction options for lesbians and bisexual women. These options should be reflected in HR policies on maternity leave.

WHAT INDUSTRY / SECTOR ARE YOU IN?

23 % Financial Services Provider

48 % Banking

6 % Asset Management

15 % Insurance

2 % Legal

6 % Other

WHAT IS THE SIZE OF YOUR COMPANY?

5-19
employees
4%

20-99
employees
8%

100+
employees
9%

500+
and above
employees
79%

WHICH ROLE ARE YOU IN?



WHAT IS YOUR CORPORATE RANK?

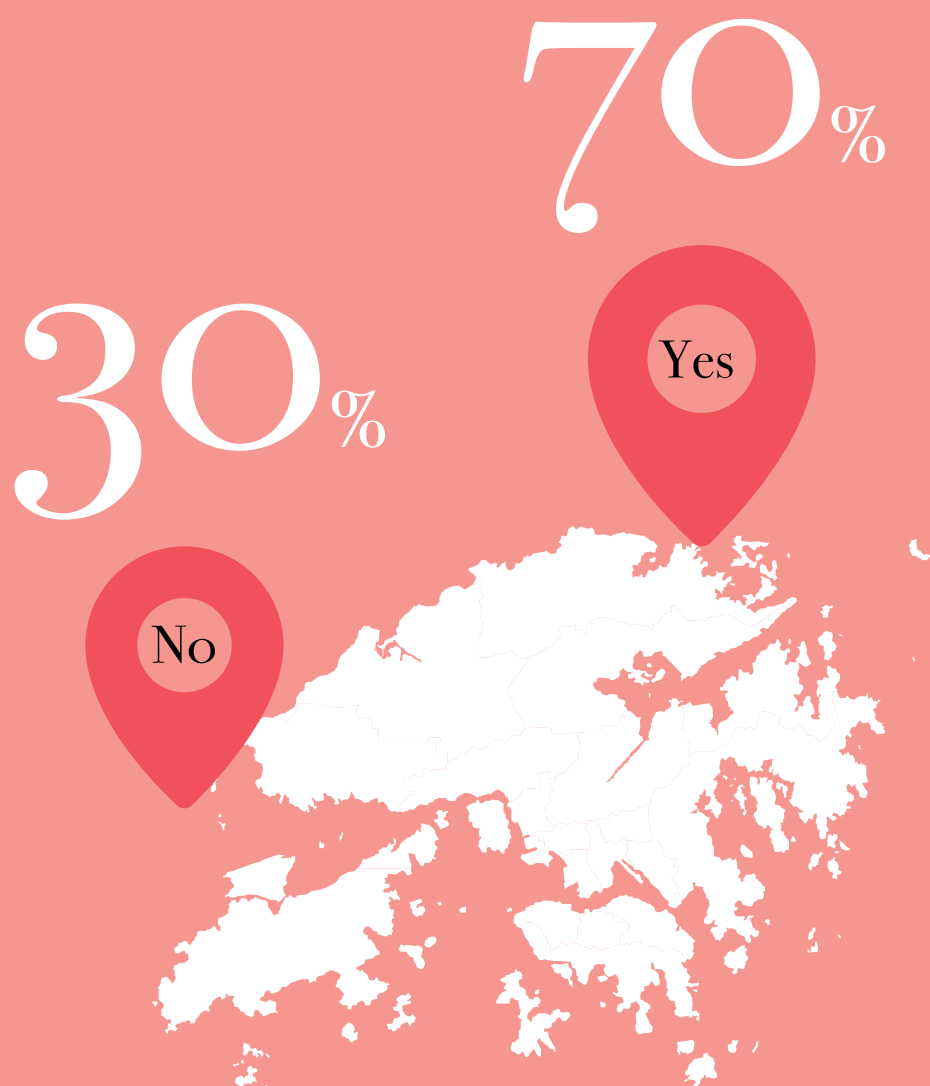
62% Associate and below (Analyst, AVP, Manager)

28% Middle Management (Director, VP, SVP)

7% Senior Management (MD)

3% CEO / Executive Management

HAVE YOU ALWAYS WORKED IN HONG KONG?



53%

Yes

DOES YOUR COMPANY ADOPT
A **LGBT⁺** INCLUSIVE APPROACH WHERE
EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES
(HEALTHCARE, HOUSING ALLOWANCE AND OTHER BENEFITS)
FOR **LGBT⁺** ARE STATED IN
HUMAN RESOURCES POLICIES?

41%

No

7%

Partially

DO YOU FEEL
SUFFICIENTLY COVERED
BY YOUR COMPANY'S
ANTI-DISCRIMINATION
POLICY?



50%
Yes

44%
No

6%
Partially

E.g. Rank differences, varied by countries, unclear instructions.

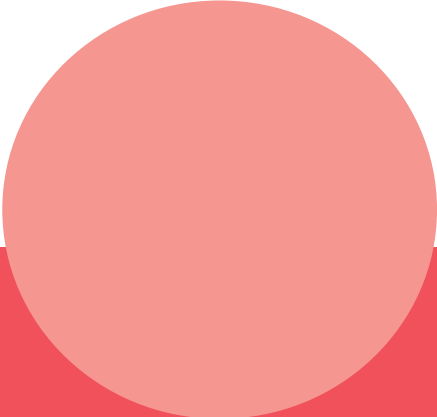
DOES YOUR COMPANY
PROVIDE MEANS
OR CHANNELS TO
REPORT DISCRIMINATION?

60%

Yes

40%

No





DOES YOUR COMPANY
OFFER LGBT+
INCLUSIVE / ALLY TRAINING
TO ALL STAFF?

9% Yes, it is mandatory

21% Yes, it is on demand

4% Yes, if I ask my line manager/HR

66% No

IN YOUR WORK
EXPERIENCE, HAVE
YOU EVER KNOW
OF OR INVOLVED
IN GRIEVANCE
AND DISCIPLINARY
MEASURES ASSOCIATED
WITH ONE'S SEXUAL
ORIENTATION?

7%

Yes

93%

No

IF YES, WHICH OF
THE FOLLOWING
ARE GRIEVANCE
AND DISCIPLINARY
MEASURES ASSOCIATED
WITH BEING?

67%

Gay

33%

LESBIAN



DO YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE RAISING ISSUES OF DISCRIMINATION CONCERNING YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION WITH THE FOLLOWING?

Your colleagues:
52% Yes / 48% No

Your manager:
45% Yes / 55% No

Human Resources:
52% Yes / 48% No



DO YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE RAISING ISSUES OF DISCRIMINATION CONCERNING YOUR GENDER IDENTITY WITH THE FOLLOWING?

Your manager:
54% Yes / 46% No

Your colleagues:
48% Yes / 52% No

Human Resources:
50% Yes / 50% No



ARE YOU AWARE OF OUT LGBT+ COLLEAGUES IN YOUR COMPANY?



61%

Yes

39%

No

ARE THERE ANY OUT
(GAY/BISEXUAL/TRANS)
SENIOR MALE LEADERSHIP
IN YOUR COMPANY?



35%
Yes

65%
No

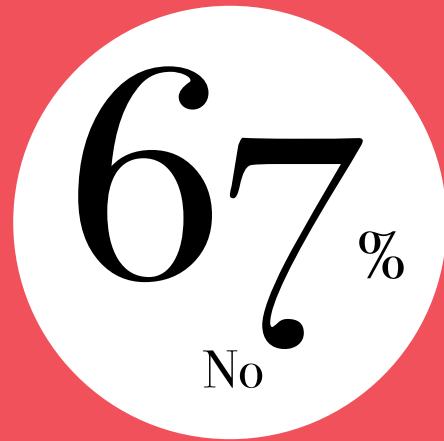
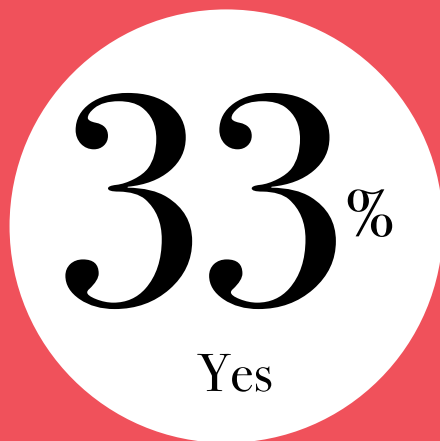
ARE THERE ANY OUT (LESBIAN/BISEXUAL/TRANS) SENIOR FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN YOUR COMPANY?



29%
Yes

71%
No

HAVE YOU
FELT DISADVANTAGED
IN YOUR CAREER FOR
BEING IDENTIFIED AS
LGBT+?



HAVE YOU
EXPERIENCED
DISCRIMINATION
AS A RESULT OF
YOUR SEXUAL
ORIENTATION
AT WORK?

19% 81%
Yes No

IF YES, IS THE
DISCRIMINATION
FROM ANY
OF THE
FOLLOWING?

38% From peers/ colleagues
41% From managers
21% From clients



TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU
AGREE OR **DISAGREE**
THAT THERE IS A GLASS CEILING
FOR LGBT+ ON THE
CORPORATE LADDER?



18% Agree **47%** Somewhat agree



18% Disagree **17%** Somewhat disagree

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU
AGREE THAT IT IS HARDER FOR
LESBIANS AND/OR BISEXUAL WOMAN
TO COME OUT IN THE WORKPLACE?
AND WHY?



32% Agree 46% Somewhat agree



14% Disagree 8% Somewhat disagree

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE THAT IT IS HARDER FOR LESBIANS AND BISEXUAL WOMEN TO CLIMB UP THE CORPORATE LADDER?

27% Agree

39% Somewhat agree

10% Disagree

34% Somewhat disagree

On the issue of a glass ceiling for LGBT+ corporate employees, 18% of the survey respondents agreed and 47% somewhat agreed that such a ceiling exists. When asked whether it is harder for lesbians and bisexual women to come out in the workplace, 32% agreed and 46% somewhat agreed. This question solicited the most written comments from survey respondents (34%). One respondent wrote, “Gay men are more accepted in mainstream culture than lesbians. Lesbians and bisexual women have the issue of not only being a woman, but also [of] not being heterosexual, which often is ‘threatening’ to older white men who are disproportionately in positions of power.” Other respondents pointed to the low visibility of lesbians and bisexual women in corporate settings, the stigmatisation of women, and the fear of being judged as both a woman and a lesbian. 27% agreed and 39% somewhat agreed with the statement that it is difficult for lesbians and bisexual women to climb up the corporate ladder.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU
AGREE OR **DISAGREE**
THAT THERE IS SEXUAL
HARASSMENT IN REGARDS TO
ONE'S SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN
THE WORKPLACE?



13% Agree **41%** Somewhat agree



18% Disagree **28%** Somewhat disagree

DOES YOUR COMPANY HAVE A LGBT+ EMPLOYEE NETWORK GROUP (e.g. PRIDE)?

53% Yes

42% No

5% Kind of





Focus Group

Findings & Discussion

The two focus groups provided more nuanced descriptions of the workplace experiences of lesbians and bisexual women in Hong Kong. Both groups met on Zoom in August 2020, with the sessions lasting 90 minutes each. Coming out was a prevalent issue for participants. If a lesbian or bisexual woman is not out at work, then she will likely avoid social situations in which she might be expected to share details of her personal life, particularly business functions that senior executives or department heads might attend with their heterosexual spouses and children. A few participants also mentioned the self-imposed limitations that one places on oneself in not being out at work.

One senior-level participant stated, “I’ve been working for over 20 years. Not being out as a lesbian has established limits on my career progression. I cannot attend many functions. I cannot participate in many conversations. After I came out at work five years ago, I felt more at ease with myself. So my work performance also got better as I didn’t have to hide myself. I was more willing to share information about myself. I’ve noticed that it has had an effect on others, too.” A junior participant chimed in, “I felt coming out is about well-being. I wanted to share more details about myself, more about trivial things in my life other than work issues, with my colleagues.”



A Snapshot of Fear

“Fourteen years ago, I was working in a an Asian city where people couldn’t talk about LGBT issues freely, especially at work. I usually spent the weekends with my then girlfriend and we held hands in public. After one weekend, I went into the office and my colleagues were in the pantry whispering when they saw me. The energy was all wrong. I could sense that people were talking behind my back or talking about me. Finally by the end of the day, one of my good friends at work pulled me aside, and shared, ‘you know we heard this thing’. My initial reaction was **fear**. I quickly told a white lie and covered it up.

On another occasion during a casual drinks session with senior colleagues, they joked about a gay colleague in the department. It was during the great financial crisis in 2008 and redundancies had started to occur, and the senior executives exclaimed in jest, ‘let’s get rid of the gay guy’. That gave me **a lot of anxiety and fear**. I eventually left the company.

The trigger to my departure was an application to step up into a bigger role within the company. After meeting with the hiring manager, I received no update or outcome regarding my application. I solicited my line manager’s help in getting some feedback and the response from senior management had nothing to do with my ability or the role. **The feedback was that I wasn’t client-facing appropriate**. When the new hire for that specific role came on board, I realised what client-facing appropriate meant. She was absolutely gorgeous and would not look out of place in a beauty pageant. So then I figured out that that’s what client-facing appropriate meant. It did not matter that she did not have any relevant experience for that role.”



Stress and anxiety often take a heavy emotional toll on lesbians and bisexual women at work. Not only are they conscious of their work performance, but they are often judged on their looks and gender expression. Being masculine in appearance can be seen as discrediting the company. Therefore, masculine-presenting or butch lesbians often have to expend additional effort to be recognised as valuable, committed and competitive. Being a masculine woman does not translate to being one of the boys in the boys' club. Being collegial with male colleagues is one matter, being able to climb up the corporate ladder is another.

Cisgender lesbians and bisexual women often also face the issue of invisibility. One focus group participant in a client-facing role claimed that "because I look like a cisgender straight female ... no one really suspects anything or asks me anything". Another participant who worked on the trading floor noted, "Perhaps I don't look like the typical lesbian either. Some colleagues just come out with very presumptuous questions like what does your husband do or what does your boyfriend do."

The participants also discussed strategies for coping with being different in gender expression. One participant who worked in human resources stated, "When I went to work after I came out, I started dressing much more boyishly and was much more lesbian in my expression. I started to realise that what I wanted to do was just to be able to visibly show it [i.e., her sexual orientation] to somebody without them having to ask. I didn't want them to wonder, and I didn't want it to get in the way of connecting with somebody socially."

Another participant saw herself as a bridge to a situation in which a masculine lesbian was being harassed in the bank. She described the situation as follows: "I recall an incident when a tomboyish colleague joined our bank. She was on another team but rumours of a TB [a colloquial term for tomboy] joining our company spread to our team. I was stunned that this was still considered to be news. They were so gossipy about her. They even said they were not sure whether the TB was a boy or a girl and that they didn't know how to talk to her. I was shocked. Someone from my team even went ... next door to see what she looked like! In the end, I acted as the bridge. I got my team members to meet the other team and to start talking with each other."

In financial services, promotion is often linked with one's ability to obtain sponsorship through a mentor. Mentorship is critical to career advancement. For lesbians, establishing positive relationships can be hindered by their sexuality when co-workers have issues concerning lesbian and gay persons. One participant recalled the stress that she had experienced with one particular co-worker who was known to be morally conservative: "I would avoid working with her because she stressed me out a lot. Whenever we spoke there were a lot of layers to what she was trying to say. And I am not confident about having that sort of conversation.... So I did try to avoid working with her as much as I could. And I know that it also affected ... my work ratings a little bit. I did feel sad about that."

When seeking mentorship opportunities, lesbian and bisexual women also have to factor in the availability of mentors with whom they would feel comfortable building a trusting relationship. One participant discussed the challenges she faced in locating a senior female mentor: "Female seniors ... don't really drink or socialise that much. Not like ... men. So that's a bit of a corporate culture, and differences within the senior band as well. Then again, there are fewer female than male seniors. And there are even fewer female seniors who are different and are willing to speak up. So the band of seniors that I can tap into is a very small pool. Hence, despite my company being very supportive in general, the group that I need to tap into for help and sponsorship ... is very sparse."

When asked about promotion opportunities, another participant responded that she has to work twice as hard as her non-LGB colleagues at the same tasks to demonstrate her abilities. She explained: "I think for me, energy-wise, psychologically-wise, it takes more out of me. I need to say more. I need to take ten steps more compared to my, let's say, male colleagues. They just sit down, and automatically they have something to talk about. I have to think harder. I have to engage harder with senior people in the department."

Asking for a promotion can also be a daunting task for lesbians and bisexual women. One participant commented, "When you are embarrassed about asking for a promotion because you don't have a family, you have to tell yourself that you do have a family. You might have a partner or you might be thinking of starting a family. If you keep telling people that you're a single woman, your boss/manager will not consider your case. Let's face it. We also want to take the next step. We also want to get promoted."



All of the focus group participants had extensive work experience, with their professional engagement in the field ranging from two to 20 years. Many had worked in cities other than Hong Kong, including London, Malaysia, Shanghai, Singapore and Taiwan, and had thus been exposed to various work cultures. It is not only a company's location that matters in shaping its organisational culture; the composition of its client base and market concerns are also key factors in whether a company is openly supportive of LGBT issues. One participant shared her experience of working in the wealth management department of her bank, which objected to changing the bank's logo to rainbow colours during Pride Week for fear of losing potential clients.

The existence of an LGBT+ employee network is a positive indicator for LGBT employees, as one participant noted: "It's really great to know of these networks and the LGBT community in Asia. I had actually feared coming back to Asia, feared that I wouldn't be accepted. But you know people can be discriminatory if they want to.... I still wanted to go home." Hong Kong's corporate culture was perceived as more open than that of other Asian cities - Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Shanghai by most participants. The international composition of employees and expert-heavy teams contribute to a more open environment in acknowledging LGBT D&I initiatives.

In recent years, global players in the financial industry have participated in key local LGBTQI+ events such as Pride Parade and Pink Dot. If LGBT employee networks were available in their companies, most of the participants were aware of them. Most had joined these networks in the hope of raising general awareness within the workplace but even more to find a safe space in their work environments. Their experiences in the networks varied. Some felt that there is still a lack of queer women's voices in general: "Things are improving for the queer or LGBT community in general within financial services, but queer women are less loud in this space. Comparatively speaking, gay white males are probably the most prominent group within these networks."

The split between global and local teams was also articulated by most participants. A few mentioned being wary of local managers whose traditional Confucian values and religious beliefs tend towards conservatism with respect to LGBT issues. As a result, lesbian and bisexual employees refrain from pursuing LGBT D&I initiatives or sharing personal stories during team-building activities. The end result is that Pride events within business organisations tend to attract more participation from expatriate employees than local Hong Kong employees, prompting one local participant to comment: "If the global team does not take the lead to do something, the local team will not take it up. So we need to step up as well because these global campaigns do benefit us. They are empowering to us local folks as well."

A participant employed by a Taiwanese bank made the following somewhat surprising observation: "I work in a Taiwanese bank. We all know that same-sex marriage is legal in Taiwan but human resources here have never discussed ... benefits for same-sex couples. They have talked about respecting people of different sexual orientations but that's it. I was surprised. I was expecting the work culture in a Taiwanese bank to be different, to be more open. But it is actually very close-minded."



What does it mean to be out as a lesbian or bisexual woman in business?

Being a role model

“It is kind of emotional but someone ... said to me that if I come out then I can become a role model for others.”

“Being a woman is already difficult in corporate culture. There is an additional layer for queer women. Because there aren’t very many visible queer women out there as role models, as leaders, it still affects the way that we view what a successful queer woman should look like or could look like.”

78% of respondents acknowledge that it is harder for LGBT+ women to come out in the workplace. Women can struggle for visibility in the workplace and LGBT+ women even more so. This gets more pronounced at the leadership levels as well, as a minority subgroup within an already underrepresented group. Until gender representation at the leadership levels become more equal, we will continue to see a lack of out LGBT+ women role models. It is not just about being an out LGBT+ role model, the LGBT+ community is diverse with different identities facing different challenges that is not always well understood, and there is room to be an out ally for other identities, i.e. lesbians, bisexuals, transgender women, etc. LGBT+ women come in different shapes, colors and expression. Women with same-sex desires can find it easier to pass as heterosexual women especially when they do not ‘look like a lesbian’, i.e. short haircut and masculine dress, which has also resulted in the view that LGB+ women look a certain way.

Bringing your whole self to work

“I guess I didn’t bring my whole self to work before I came out, and that just meant that I wasn’t excelling at work. I was always holding back one way or another subconsciously. But after coming out, I was much happier. I could genuinely bring my whole self to work. I actually started doing better at work as well.”

It is no secret that wellbeing is linked to a sense of psychological safety to be who you are. Closeted LGBT+ individuals expend a proportion of their energy daily to cover their identities even in innocent social interactions with colleagues when talking about their weekend activities and who they spent it with. That is not where this ends though, LGBT+ women can also be hiding their gender expressions and/or gender identity, for fear of being treated differently and/or viewed negatively. Many transgender individuals opt to resign from their workplace to conduct their transition and then reenter a different workplace after with their renewed identity.

In the case of queer women, there were not always clear benefits for participating in LGBT+ employee networks due to a struggle to identify with the community and do not always feel welcome. There is a perception that LGBT+ employee networks were more often catered for gay men or foreign colleagues, with less incentive for queer local Hong Kong women. This could create a negative cycle where LGBT+ employee networks will remain the sole domain for gay men and foreign colleagues.

Speak up and ask for LGBT-inclusive policies and support

“Every company should have policies supportive of LGBT employees. It should not be a bonus.”

Speaking up for change can be particularly challenging for an invisible minority, especially when they are not being represented in current policies, or even expressly stated under anti-discrimination policies. Where policies fail to mention LGBT+ related terms directly, it puts pressure on employees to speak up about the need to have more inclusive policies, which could also result in outing themselves to management or HR representatives, or in the case of a straight ally, being incorrectly perceived as a member of the LGBT+ community. There is also a perceived reluctance on the part of management to loudly communicate LGBT+ related benefits which were already being offered by employers, which could diminish the potential symbolic value of having these benefits in the first place. A notable barrier mentioned was that LGBT+ employees may not always know the right terms or language on how to ask for benefits.

As an international financial hub, Hong Kong is host to international talent from across the globe. It was noted that foreigners (both members of the community and allies) and/or members of the regional or global teams were viewed as being more willing to speak up and champion for change, and this would be influenced by where they have lived prior to living in Hong Kong. Foreigners who came from markets that were more progressive

in recognizing LGBT+ rights and benefits were more likely to speak up. Conversely, foreigners who came from more restrictive markets were more likely to participate in LGBT+ employee network groups due to the lack of similar platforms previously. The differences in legislation across different countries could lead to inequities amongst LGBT+ employees, e.g. some could enjoy relocation support for same sex partners whilst others may not. A second order effect of the differences in country LGBT+ recognition could also impact the likelihood of what LGBT+ employees deem possible, e.g. possibility of getting married and having a family of their own. We expect this to improve with increased representation of LGBT+ couples starting their own families.

Be in a position to change the definition of leadership

“As rising females in this industry, we need to be more assertive, we need to self-promote and we need to be louder; we need to be more aggressive. But I think hopefully when we get to the top, we can also show others that a leader can be caring and kind, can be soft-spoken. We need to change the definition of what leadership means. That’s kind of the true goal of ... inclusion and diversity. It’s not just about getting different people to the top. It’s also about making the definition of the top different.”

66% of respondents agree that it is more difficult for LGBT+ women to be promoted. There is a healthy skepticism that LGBT+ women will have a seat at the table to challenge our current notions of leadership. When this is combined with the lack of female representation at senior leadership teams and a lack of collaboration between women’s networks and LGBT+ networks, LGBT+ women can often feel that a choice has to be made between gender equity and LGBT+ rights.



Recommendations to Employers

Set up a comprehensive diversity ally training programme.

The LGBT+ community is made up of many different lived experiences, beyond gay men and lesbian women. Sexism and racism also impact the lived experiences of the community, bringing a different lens to the treatment and equity of LGBT+ individuals and impacting their own comfort levels with speaking up and being out. It can feel overwhelming, but it is important to remember that we cannot paint all LGBT+ individuals with the same lens when designing solutions and creating safe spaces.

Ensure that all levels of the company (management and frontline staff) and both global and local teams are in line with D&I initiatives. There can be tensions between global values with local cultural nuances that if not addressed openly, does not always trickle to the subcultures in the frontline or across all teams. Acknowledging these challenges and providing a forum for discussion around why this is important and outlining anti-discrimination standards for all employees is a start.

Support openly out leaders and employees in the workplace.

It is important to note that out leaders and employees may have differing comfort levels when it comes to their own visibility, working with them on an individual basis to understand their comfort levels and to cultivate their own confidence as they build their networks both internally and externally can be a boon to a company's employer brand as well as opportunities to influence with other internal stakeholders. Out leaders and employees have placed a certain amount of trust in the hands of management and their colleagues, this needs to be met with support and empathy.

Be sensitive to and aware of homophobia, racism and sexism in the workplace. If there is a report of inappropriate and/or unprofessional behaviour (bullying, harassment, discriminatory remarks) targeted at LGBT employees, take it seriously!

Recognize that it takes courage to speak up about these incidents and avoid brushing it off, dismissing it as a joke or invalidating their experience.

Review programs and policies related to how a woman should dress to ensure that it is inclusive and to normalize gender neutral or androgynous expression, e.g. company dress codes and training related to presence/branding. It is more common to see a variety of gender expression from women in the workplace as opposed to men. Women enjoy a broader tolerance of fashion choices than their male counterparts. This means they can get away more easily in comparison when dressing in a more masculine manner. However, they can still face significant discouragement or discrimination from others as a result.

LGBT+ women representation is inextricably tied up to women representation in the workplace, we will only see the needle move on LGBT+ women when the needle moves on women overall. It is important to recognize that gender equity also includes ethnic minority women, LGBT+ women, women with disabilities, etc. to avoid working with a myopic view of able-bodied heterosexual women. As such, programs aimed at supporting women need to recognize these nuances and adjust as needed. Connect your women's networks with your other employee networks, not just your LGBT+ network.

Make LGBT+ related benefits visible and easily understood by all employees. Including these in new hire orientation materials, as well guidelines on how to seek support if needed. By doing so, you are sending a message of inclusion to the workforce.

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Community Partners:

Lesbians in Finance (LIF)

Lesbians in Finance (LIF) is a working group within the HK LGBT Interbank Forum geared towards the specific needs and career development of lesbians working in the financial sector across Asia.

Its work is accomplished via specialised professional events, soft skills development and networking events. LIF aspires to become the leading forum for lesbians and their allies in the Asian financial industry.

Interbank LGBT Forum

Formally established in 2016, the Interbank LGBT Forum organises activities and facilitates best corporate practices for more than 30 member and observer companies in the financial services industry. The forum provides a platform for companies to benchmark their corporate practices, their human resources policies in particular, against global competitors in the financial industry.

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