




# Gender diversity and sexual orientation in the South African workplace



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## Gender diversity and sexual orientation in the South African workplace

We are both pleased and honoured to present this groundbreaking special issue of the African Journal of Career Development (AJCD) focused on 'Gender Diversity and Sexual Orientation in the South African Workplace'. In a continent where many nations still grapple with inclusivity and equality based on sexual orientation and gender identity, this is the first known issue in South Africa dedicated to dissecting the subject in the context of career development and workplace environments. South Africa has been a pioneer in affirming rights related to gender and sexual orientation. In the wake of apartheid, the South African constitution was recrafted to be one of the most progressive in the world, explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on gender (diversity), sex and sexual orientation. The constitutional affirmation in Chapter 2, under the Bill of Rights, is a keystone for all South African legislation and governance models related to career development and workplace conduct (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The *Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998* and the *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000 (PEPUDA)* also warrant mention as legislative frameworks that provide a safeguard against discrimination in South African workplaces (Department of Labour, 2014; Republic of South Africa, 2000).

Despite legislative landmarks, day-to-day realities reveal that there is much work to be done to transform South African workplaces into spaces of true diversity and inclusivity. Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity often starts early – in schools and higher educational institutions, places where career aspirations are moulded (Buthelezi & Brown, 2023; Francis, 2023). Therefore, a critical examination of career education from a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual (LGBTQIA+) perspective is long overdue. Educators, career counsellors and human resources professionals have a duty to ensure that guidance given to young people is free from bias, openly discussing career options without pigeonholing individuals into traditional gender roles or excluding them based on their sexual orientation.

It is crucial to examine the lived experiences of individuals belonging to diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. While South Africa has robust legislation, the everyday realities often reveal gaps in the translation of law into practice, especially in careers that are historically gendered. In sectors like mining (Dlamini, 2006; Maake et al., 2023; Niehaus, 2002), construction (English & Le Jeune, 2012) and engineering (Bowen et al., 2021) that are traditionally male-dominated, policy and practice can diverge widely for females and gender non-conforming identities. While many companies have inclusive human resources policies on paper, the shop floor often tells a different story (Luiz & Terziev, 2022). For instance, transgender individuals frequently face barriers in accessing gender-appropriate bathroom facilities despite official policies that should guarantee this right (Patel, 2017). Similarly, in education and nursing sectors, traditionally viewed as female-oriented careers, gay men often report microaggressions and gender bias that may not always be overt but subtly question their 'fit' into these roles (Kalemba, 2020; Moosa & Bhana, 2022). While South Africa's Department of Basic Education has anti-discrimination guidelines, teachers of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in conservative communities often are constantly facing discrimination and harassment (Brown & Diale, 2017; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022; Richardson & Archer, 2008).

Clearly, policy formation and legislative backing are vital, but these alone do not translate into lived experiences of dignity and respect. The journey towards complete inclusion is ongoing, and each one of us has a role to play in it. We look forward to your active engagement with this special

issue as we together build more inclusive workplaces for everyone.

## Contributions to this special issue

### **Ubisi, L.M., Tsabede, W. & Fourie, E. Intersections of gender and sexual diversity in the career trajectories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual individuals**

The article delves into the challenges LGBTQIA+ individuals face while searching for, entering and adapting to careers, emphasising the profound impact organisational cultural norms can have on both their professional and personal identities. The study's primary objective was to understand how these individuals navigate the complexities of gender and sexuality diversity in diverse work settings. Utilising both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the review sourced data from local and global publications because of a lack of comprehensive South African scholarship in this domain. Findings revealed that, despite increased visibility and accommodation for LGBTQIA+ individuals in many organisations, discrimination, encompassing issues such as racism, queerphobia and marginalisation, remains pervasive. In response to these findings, the article calls for urgent mental health support measures for LGBTQIA+ employees and emphasises the necessity of implementing anti-discriminatory guidelines to foster and maintain gender and sexual diversity inclusivity in the workplace.

### **Maake, T. 'Are there gay men in the mines?' Towards unsettling the heteronormative male occupational culture in mining**

This groundbreaking study offers a critical examination of the male-dominated occupational culture in South Africa's mining industry, focusing on the often overlooked issue of its heteronormative nature and the resultant marginalisation of gay male identities. While previous research has examined the ways in which women are marginalised within this occupational culture, this paper fills an essential gap by addressing the erasure and challenges faced by gay men within the same context. The paper concludes with a strong call for the mining industry to acknowledge and address this heteronormative culture by promoting sexual diversity and creating safe, inclusive working environments. It calls upon the industry, policymakers and society at large to scrutinise and dismantle deeply ingrained heteronormative practices and to pave the way for more inclusive workplaces in the mining sector.

### **Msiza, V. & Kagola, O. Troubling gender norms: Reflections of two male early childhood teacher educators**

This insightful paper confronts a salient issue in the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in South Africa: the stark underrepresentation of male teachers. While research has

underscored the importance of male figures in the educational context for children, the article elucidates the complex challenges that men face when considering teaching as a career in early education, particularly in navigating gender norms. Structured as a self-reflective paper, the authors draw from their own experiences as young men entering the world of ECE teaching in South African higher education institutions. In examining the issues that hinder men from entering and staying in ECE, the authors expose the lingering gendered norms present even within institutions intended to be vehicles for societal transformation. These norms not only discourage men from entering the field but also contribute to their departure, leading to a lack of diversity that impacts both students and fellow educators. This article is a valuable addition to the discourse on gender diversity in education, presenting an on-the-ground perspective that complements statistical analyses and broad-brush policy reviews.

### **Nghonyama, M.G., Maluleke, L., Seitshiro, T. Careership: The experiences of women in choosing career paths in Technical and Vocational Education and Training in South Africa**

This study investigates the influence of gender and race on the career choices of students attending Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. The findings reveal that both gender and race continue to significantly shape students' career decision-making processes and eventual career paths. The study highlights the need for special attention to be given to women in TVET colleges. The conclusions stress that it is crucial to understand the various enablers and disablers influencing career decision-making, particularly the impact of gender and race. By shedding light on these factors, the study offers valuable guidance for TVET colleges on how to better support incoming students in making informed career decisions.

### **Haitembu, R.K. Mbongo, E.N. & Brown, A. The job interview experiences of a Namibian transgender teacher graduate in pursuing employment**

This pioneering study delves into an area frequently overlooked in workplace diversity research: the job interview experiences of transgender individuals. While previous studies have acknowledged that transgender people face substantial discrimination in the workplace, the nuances of their experiences in job interviews remain largely unexplored. This paper aims to fill this gap, offering a detailed case study of a transgender woman, Selma and her experience in the Namibian job market. By shining a light on the specific challenges faced by transgender people in job interviews, this study makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of the barriers to employment and career progression for this marginalised community. It serves as a wake-up call for employers,

policymakers and society at large to address these biases and implement strategies for a more inclusive and equitable job market.

### Nichols, H.J. School principals' responses in creating an inclusive schooling space for gender and sexual diverse learners

This article critically examines the gap between South African Department of Basic Education policies advocating for inclusivity and the lived experiences of LGBTIQ students in schools. The article aims to investigate the role of high school principals in creating safe, inclusive environments for learners with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Utilising the Social Justice Leadership Theory as a lens, the study scrutinises the attitudes and actions of school principals in the Free State and Gauteng provinces of South Africa. The study serves as an urgent call to action for educational authorities, urging them to take immediate steps to create a more socially just and inclusive educational landscape. It highlights the consequence of leadership silence and apathy, revealing how it perpetuates a discriminatory school culture and adversely affects students' experiences and well-being.

## Conclusion

These articles illustrate that progressive constitutions and workplace-specific legislation serve as starting points, not end goals. These laws and guarantees are only as effective as their implementation and the social attitudes that support them. We hope that this issue fosters informed dialogue, highlights areas requiring urgent action and most importantly contributes to a more equitable workplace in South Africa and beyond. We extend our gratitude to all contributors, reviewers and readers who have made this seminal work possible.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

B.M.D., A.B., O.K. contributed equally to this work.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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